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MERCILESS MATT:

OR,

RED THUNDERBOLT'S SECRET

BY CAPTAIN CHARLES HOWARD.

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MERCILESS MATT ;

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CHAPTER I.

AFTER THE BUTCHERY.

"I'VE made up my mind that something unusual has been going on at the fort, an' I wouldn't be surprised if that something was bloody. That smoke rises directly over where Fort Mimms stood when I left it for Tennessee, three weeks ago, and it means something. God grant that nothing terrible has happened. We've seen enough of Indian horrors already, and this fair country is still blackened with the ruins of cabins made tenantless by the tomahawk and scalping-knife. I left a wife and three children within the walls of Fort Mimms, and I pray thee, Father in heaven, that they are safe.

"Yet,"—and the sigh that followed indicated the bitterness of the admission—"yet that black smoke prepares my spirit for the worst. It arises from a great amount of burning wood ; but I'll solve the question soon. God give me strength to confront disaster !"

The foregoing words fell from the lips of a middle-aged man, hurrying down the right bank of the Alabama river, as the gray streaks of light announced the morning of the 31st of August, 1813.

There was nothing peculiar to distinguish the man from the generality of southern settlers, and though perhaps fifty years of age, his spare frame boasted of the strength of youth with the agility of the cat. His dress was of the simplest but most serviceable fabric ; his moccasins were unornamented, and the long rifle which he trailed at his side was, contrary to

the customs of early days, entirely devoid of silver ornamentation. The great veins standing out in bold prominence on the almost fleshless forehead and temples, as well as on the skinny hands, denoted the exertion to which he was putting himself, and the facial expression was indicative of intense solicitude. The dark eyes never flitted from the rising smoke, and his gait seemed to increase as he advanced.

Presently he turned from the bank and plunged into the river. The stream, at the point selected, was quite fordable, and in a short time the settler stood on the opposite shore, while the smoke he had long noted was hiding the sky directly over his head.

"That stillness is the silence of the dead," he murmured, as he paused at the water's edge, in a listening attitude. "I can hear nothing, not a cry, and the old fort is just beyond the timber."

As if moved by some sudden impulse, he darted forward, and disappeared among the timber. Soon a horrible stench greeted his nostrils, and a sickening pallor overspread his face. But, with a Herculean effort he shook it off, and shut out the odor with his hands. He was facing the wind which was carrying the stench before it.

Suddenly he emerged from the forest, and a moment later threw his hand before his eyes, and staggered toward the trees again, with the actions of a drunken man.

"My God!" he groaned, with all the agony of a husband's and father's spirit. "It is as I have feared, but twice as terrible!"

For a moment he could not trust himself to gaze upon the scene before him, and when he did remove his hands and unclose his eyes to its horrors, Matthew Dean was not the calm settler of a minute before. Now his coal-black orbs burned with a flame that was as wild and fierce as that of a hunted beast, and he seemed to have, at one terrible stride, stepped into the middle of another decade. Before him lay the smoldering ruins of Fort Mimms, which has contributed to our national history the blackest, bloodiest page that lies between its lids. Not a specimen of breathing humanity greeted the settler's vision, but here and there lay a dark form, now distinguished by a plume, anon recognized by the uniform of the

garrison. Of all the houses of the settlers without the strong stockade, not one was standing; but from the ruins of each rose volumes of smoke, which united in the upper air, and formed the black testimony of Indian ferocity.

With a slow tread Matthew Dean at length moved forward, and presently stood among the ruins of the fort.

A portion of the heavy timbers were still blazing, and the solitary spectator could see that a number of dead bodies were roasting among the flames.

From the sickening sight he turned with compressed lip, and pale and determined visage. In that terrible moment he felt himself wifeless, childless, friendless.

With the impulsive movement of the tiger, he bounded to the ruins of a cabin which had occupied a little spot of ground a short distance from the southern stockade.

His face proclaimed him the surveyor of the ruins of his home!

The logs were scattered hither and thither, and something like a sense of relief stole over his face as he turned away. He could see no bodies among the smoking logs. All at once he walked around the ruined cabin, and entered the little garden, filled with the products of such places. Even this spot had not escaped the red-men's fury, for their keen tomahawks and knives had leveled the berry-bushes, and they would tempt none with their luscious fruit again.

"The massacre was complete," he said, again surveying the entire work of destruction; "but I can not see how the fort was surprised. For, undoubtedly, the savages came up before the garrison was prepared. Major Beasley was not the man for the position he held—no, not the man. But where are my wife and children? Oh God, where?" and again his gaze swept the work of destruction. "I hope that some escaped, and that they are among the number. And Myra, my eldest born—my beloved daughter—oh, to think that yesterday was to have been her wedding-day! I will search the ruins. If dead, why did I not arrive home yesterday and die with them—die fighting for them against the red fiends?"

He was turning to commence the mournful work of searching for those he held so dear, when the stammering accents of a dying mortal riveted him to the ground.

"Matt—Matthew—De—an?"

The voice came from behind a pile of currant-bushes which the tomahawk had felled, and with a bound Matthew Dean reached the spot.

His hands caught the bushes and tossed them away, discovering the form of a man lying in a pool of blood, and trying to articulate something as he looked up into the settler's face.

"Zeke Hartman, by my soul!" cried Matthew or Matt Dean, as he was generally known, as he stooped and lifted the man's scalpiess head from the lakelet of gore. "How did this terrible thing happen? Where's Kate and the children?"

"Water, Matt, water!" gasped the dying man, clearing his throat with a mighty effort. "Water, to take the blood from my throat, an' then p'r'aps I kin tell all afore I go."

Matt Dean doffed his jacket, placed it under Hartman's head, and hurried to the fort's spring for the desired fluid. He found the once clear water tinged with blood, but still as cold as ever, and filling his cup, he returned to the dying man.

"Here, Zeke, I calkilate as how this'll relieve you, an' then I'll fix you up."

"No, yer won't, Matt Dean," said Hartman, looking up with a grim smile. "You shan't do a thing to my arm, my side, my leg, and this well-nigh hairless head. When the Indians kill a man's wife and six children, there's not much use in living. I want to go to them. There, Matt, the water has cleared my throat; but this won't last long."

As the soldier-settler spoke, Matt Dean felt his hands grow cold, and the glaze of death dimmed his eye.

"Quick, Zeke, tell me of my own. Did anybody escape? I'll hear the story of the massacre some other time, an' from other lips than yours. You're going fast, there's no use denying it. Your hands are sweatin' icy drops now."

"That's right, Matt, I don't want to live," said Hartman. "The red devils came upon us yesterday. We fought like tigers, but it war no go. Heaven was against us."

"No, no, don't say that, Zeke; you're dying, you know."

"I'll take that back, Matt, for mebbe it ar' all for the best;

but I can't see inter it. Yer wife fought like a soldier, and yer children swung the ax like men when the Injuns sot the fort on fire and swarmed in like bees. There, Matt, that's enough; don't ask me to tell the rest."

"You must, Zeke. I will know the worst. Quick! you're going. Water? Here!"

He poured some water down Zeke Hartman's throat, and with a gasp the scalpless head fell back into his lap.

"Matt—they killed Kate, yer—two—b-b-boys, and—"

Silence; then a gasp.

"And Myra—my pet—what of her? Zeke! Oh, God, let him speak again!"

As if in answer to his prayer, Zeke Hartman revived a little, opened his bloodshot eyes, and fastened them upon the settler.

"Myra, Matt? Why—they killed her, too."

Then followed another gasp, the muttering of the name of his Creator, and Zeke Hartman was with his slaughtered wife and little ones in a better world.

For a moment Matthew Dean gazed upon the face of, as he believed, the only survivor of the massacre of Fort Mimms, and then, slowly relinquishing the bloody head, he rose to his feet.

A moment later he was drawing log after log from the smoldering ruins of the fort. His eyes flashed like the orbs of a madman, and his actions would have proclaimed him bereft of reason as he drew forth logs that would have ordinarily resisted the united strength of ten men.

Underneath a portion of the roof of the fort—a portion which had not been burned—he found the butchered forms of his wife and the two boys. With tender hands he carried them beyond the fire, and laid them side by side upon the bloody grass.

Again he returned to his work, for now he searched for his daughter Myra, whose beauty had attracted many to the fort—for whose golden hair a great Cherokee chief had offered his life.

At last he was compelled to give over his task, for the fire, in a portion of the ruins, waxed hotter and hotter, and he returned to the slaughtered trio without his beautiful child.

"The fire has eaten up her form," he groaned, as he turned with poignant reluctance from the burning fort. "Oh, God, why was I ever born? Why have I escaped terrible deaths by the breadth of a hair to endure this? Why do I live? Why?"

The echo found an answer as it came back from the wood, and from Matt Dean's lips that answer, in all the terror of its significance, came:

"For vengeance!"

He found a spade; he made three graves, one large and two small ones, and when he stood erect again it was over three mounds of fresh earth.

"Now ye who dwell above and record the oaths of man, hear mine, and if I break it in one particular, blast me as the lightning blasts the pine, and make me one who dreads to live, yet fears to die. Over the bodies of my loved ones, oh God, I swear to become the merciless demon of the wood! These hands shall hunt forever and never spare the life of any one who wears a red skin, and calls himself a Creek. I swear to follow the red butchers through darkness and day, from spring's flowers to winter's snows, from their lodges to the war-path, thence to death. From the work of vengeance my mind and hands shall not a moment rest, and the red-man shall curse, with his dying breath, the day that witnessed the butchery of Fort Mimms. There! ye who stand around the throne, witness my oath, and then, God of my being, visit upon me thy most terrible curse if I break it."

The silence that followed the settler's vow was long and painful. He broke it with no words, with no noise. For a moment his tears fell like summer rain-drops upon the three graves, when he suddenly brushed them away, as though they were unbecoming manhood, and strode from the spot with a quick, but steady step.

The expression indelibly stamped upon his face gave assurance of the fulfillment of his terrible vow.

He believed that none escaped the massacre of the bloody 30th of August, and, with this belief urging him on, he went forth to the work of vengeance, which we are about to record.

“ Myra ! Myra ! ” he murmured, as he glided through the woods. “ Dead, and on your wedding-day ! It is terrible ! For yesterday’s work hell shall receive a new influx of fiends. Wifeless ! childless ! childless ! wifeless ! ”

CHAPTER II.

THE NIGHT BEFORE TALLUSHATCHEE.

THE atrocious massacre at Fort Mimms proved, as many Southern people had anticipated, the inauguration of one of the bloodiest of our Indian wars, whose origin we trace to the mind of one man who, during its progress, was carrying the torch and tomahawk to the cabins of the settlers of Ohio. Soon after the commencement of the war of 1812 that man—Tecumseh—the greatest red warrior and orator ever produced in savage life, left his home in the north and suddenly appeared among the half-civilized tribes of the south, whom, with that natural and fiery eloquence of which he was master, he upbraided for their effeminate pusillanimity, their degenerate civilization, counseling them to be warriors and men, not women ; to throw off the pale-face garments that disgraced them ; resume their original costume, dig up the hatchet, and declare eternal war against the Americans.

Upon the unsteady Creeks Tecumseh’s eloquence proved seed sown in productive soil, and though the more wise and prudent rejected his fanatical counsel, a large portion of the crimson tribe received it as inspired language, and the long-buried hatchet was unearthed amid the wildest eagerness for pale scalps.

Small parties of soldiers were massacred, houses were burned, men, women and children butchered, until Andrew Jackson at the head of two thousand Georgia and Tennessee riflemen marched into the Indian country and forced its denizens into submission. But, no sooner had the future victor of New Orleans left the country, than the aggressive acts were resumed in a bolder manner, and ere long were crowned by the butchery of three hundred souls at Fort Minims.

It is history we are penning now.

This deed of barbaric ferocity aroused the country. It sent a shiver to the heart of every patriot in the land, and needed not the story of the seventeen male survivors to induce prompt action. In an incredibly short space of time thirty-five hundred men sprung to arms, and again General Jackson crossed the Tennessee line to inflict upon the southern Indians a punishment more disastrous than that which "Mad Anthony" Wayne had inflicted upon their northern brethren.

During the brief interval that existed between the butchery of Fort Mimms and the entrance of Jackson's troops into Alabama, the Creeks discovered that they possessed an enemy whose hands spared neither youth nor age—a man who seemed determined to transform them into a chiefless nation. In the still hours of night a warrior sunk from the chamber of life into the unbroken rest of death, and his brethren would find him in the morning cold and motionless as marble, with a bloody spot over his heart, and four bloody parallel marks on his brow.

A frequent occurrence of such deeds was enough to strike terror to the heart of the Creek nation, the major portion of which believed the mysterious slayer an evil spirit, not flesh and blood, and this belief caused many Indians to take sides with the Americans. Not only among the lodges were the four marks placed upon the red-man's brow. Such actions indicated the ferocity of the secret slayer's revenge, and proved his fearless nature. Now and then a log would float through the great Creek town on each side of the Tombigbee, and lashed to the wood could be discerned a corpse, crowned with the hidden avenger's marks. In thicket, by the salt-lick, whither the young Creek sachems sought the antlered prince of the forest, along the little tributaries of the greater stream, lay the bloody work of the demon, making, with each succeeding death, his name a greater terror to the red confederacy.

His vengeance was directed against the Creek alone. The Cherokee and Chickasaw journeyed unmolested through the wood, but woe to the Creek who tramped at his side. There would be the sudden explosion of a rifle, the uttering

of a death-shriek, and the Cherokee would find himself alone. At length, as a protection, scouting parties of Creeks donned Cherokee and Chickasaw habiliments; but the sharp eye of the hidden slayer never failed to penetrate their disguise, and the death-shot would follow.

Ere this the reader has rightly guessed the identity of the secret avenger, and the mention of his name would now prove superfluous.

The night that followed the oath over the graves among the ruins of Fort Mimms, found the avenger on the trail, and before the blushings of another dawn, four scalps hung at his girdle. It was the commencement of the bloody work I have just catalogued, and each succeeding night was certain to witness its continuation.

The night of the second of November, 1813, found a portion of the American army, under General Coffee, encamped a short distance from Tallushatchee, on the river Coosa, in Alabama, then sometimes designated the "Mississippi Territory."

No bivouac fire was visible, and every thing denoted an intended surprise. The soldiers rested on their arms, and here and there stalked the stately form of an Indian—a friendly Creek or Cherokee. Although the night was not far advanced—the hour eight—no light was visible save a sickly one discernible through the heavy but worn canvas of a little tent. The light proceeded from a greasy lamp, and poorly revealed the face of General Coffee—a face cleanly shaven, stern in expression, and bearing a slight resemblance to the uniform portraits of Jackson. He was entirely alone, and his steely gray eyes were intently riveted upon a roughly executed map of the country washed by the Coosa and its numberless tributaries.

While the frontier General's orbs were oblivious to every thing save the lines and dots before him, the curtain that hid the entrance to the tent was raised, and the tall form of a Creek warrior stood on the threshold. For a minute his dark eyes fell upon the General, when his lips parted, in pure English:

"General!"

Somewhat startled at the voice, which so abruptly broke

the silence, Coffee raised his head and fastened his eyes upon the figure in the doorway.

The Creek regarded the white with something like a triumphant expression playing with his lips, and all at once Coffee sprung to his feet and seized his pistol.

The Creek made no show of defense.

"Dog!" cried the General, "I have you now. You should have struck me while I scanned the map of your country. My guard is dead, poor fellow, but your boldness proves your doom."

As the last words left Coffee's lips, the pistol flew to a level with the plumed one's heart, but the next moment he found his pistol arm held above his head, and almost crushed in a vise-like grip.

"Ha! ha! ha!" laughed the Creek. "If your keen eye can't pierce my paint, then I reckon as how I'm safe, General."

Instantly Coffee broke forth into a ringing laugh, and his arm hung at his side again.

"Matt Dean, you can fool the oldest of them."

"And you're one o' them, General," was the response. "I'm on my way to their camp, an' I thought I would stop a little to see if I would pass for a Creek."

"You make a capital Creek, Matt," said Coffee. "Now don't forget my instructions. Smother your thirst for revenge until the battle, and then you may wade to your knees in blood. Be careful among those who would give their right arm for a blow at your heart. But I talk to one who has forgot more about Indians than I ever knew, and I've been among them from boyhood. Go, Matt, and may God bless you."

"If I can keep my hand from a Creek's windpipe to night, I'll do so, General; but it'll be workin' ag'in' the rain."

A moment later Merciless Matt let the curtain drop, and hurried toward the Creek camp.

The Indian village of Tallushatchee was situated on the eastern bank of the Coosa river, though nearer a tributary called Tallushatchee creek. There the Creeks, numbering about eight hundred, had assembled, and Jackson had detached

Coffee to surround, surprise, and rout them. The encompassment had almost been completed when Merciless Matt left head-quarters, to penetrate the Creek town and communicate certain commands to the officer beyond, as also to gain certain important information.

The avenger found the Creeks around their fires, unsuspecting of an attack, and the vivid light fell upon and threw into bold relief the Giant forms of Weatherford, the head sachem of the Creek nation and the leading spirit of the revolt; Speckled Snake, the half-breed Cherokee; and Little Tomahawk, a celebrated Creek chief, sorely wounded at Fort Mimms. A number of warriors lay around, listening to the conversation of the chiefs, and Merciless Matt joined them with a nonchalance that disarmed all suspicion.

More than once his hand glided to his tomahawk, when his black eyes fell upon Weatherford, the planner of the butchery which had made him a wifeless and childless avenger; but he smothered his passion and resolved to bide his time.

After listening awhile to the "talk" of the great chiefs, the spy departed, and made himself master of the situation of the red forces.

"Now for McWillan," he murmured, striking toward the northern suburbs of the village. "I've a mind to finish the Red Thunderbolt as I go back. He's the fiend what led the red hellions against the old fort, and perhaps *his* tomahawk brained my dear ones. Your accursed face brings that bloody day before my eyes. I see them dead—I see Myra amid the flames. Oh God, my vow! my vow! Weatherford, you die to-night!"

Delivering his message to McWillan, he retraced his way to the Indian town. With the determined purpose of striking down Weatherford, the Red Thunderbolt of the Creeks, he visited fire after fire. He found Little Tomahawk and Speckled Snake, and questioned them regarding the sachem.

But Weatherford had suddenly left the fire, and they were ignorant of his whereabouts. Fearing to lose time in searching Tallushatchee a second time, and baffled in his purpose of revenge, he again turned his steps toward Coffee's camp.

He reached the bank of a stream just beyond the village, and at the base of a hill which hid the bivouac from his sight, when the cracking of a dry twig saluted his ears, and turning, as though pierced in the side with an arrow, Merciless Matt confronted a veritable Indian giant.

The stars showered their ambient light upon the spot where the two confronted each other in silence, and all at once a cry of recognition which he could not suppress bubbled to the lips of the avenging spy.

The giant whom he confronted was the very person whose heart-blood he sought—Weatherford, the half-breed sachem.

The chieftain's look told Matthew Dean that his subtle disguise had been penetrated—that he stood in his true character before the Red Thunderbolt.

Instinctively the avenger's hand flew to the long-bladed scalping-knife that glittered in his girdle; but the Indian made no motion to resist the attack.

"You know me, Weatherford," said Matt, as his knife left the belt. "You have the sharpest eyes in all the Creek nation, but I'm going to shut them forever."

The spy raised the knife far above his head, but there it paused, while in astonishment he was forced to contemplate the statuary sachem.

Why did not Weatherford draw his weapons and prepare to defend himself? Why did he gaze upon the knife with a nonchalant air and smile? These questions were two great mysteries to Merciless Matt Dean.

In the strangeness of his situation, the avenger's knife fell harmless at his side, and he started back.

"Weatherford, are you mad?" he cried. "Defend yourself, and forget not that I am Merciless Matt."

Then the Red Thunderbolt found his tongue

no, the secret! Regarding it, Weatherford's lips must be sealed. White Slayer, here. This belongs to you."

As he spoke, his hand was thrust beneath his long robe, and he drew forth something that elicited a cry of horror from Matt Dean's lips.

It was a tiny scalp, from which hung two long golden curls, whose brilliancy reflected back the light of the stars!

The white avenger tore it from the half-breed's hand before he could extend it.

"My God!" he cried, "this is Myra's scalp!" and he pressed the yellow curls to his lips, and held them there a long time, in which he lived over the sunny and shady past.

"Yes, yes, those curls once crowned the head of the White Slayer's angel—before the Crecks dug up the hatchet," said Weatherford, in a sympathizing tone. "But, she is far from her father's side now."

"What! do you give me hope that my child is not dead?" cried Matt Dean, springing forward again. "This is her scalp—these her curls. I've toyed with them a thousand times, and now I think more of them than I do of all the world beside. A dying man told me that you red hell-hounds killed Myra at the fort, and those who escaped the butchery saw her fall, but your words raise hope in my heart. Does my child live?"

Weatherford smiled mysteriously, and turned on his heel.

"If that's your secret I'll force it out of you!" cried Merciless Matt, darting forward like a panther. "By Heaven! Red Thunderbolt, I'll force your secret from your heart, though it be with the point of my knife."

His hand clutched Weatherford's shoulder as he hissed forth his last sentence, and the Indian wheeled in his tracks.

"Tell me, or—"

The knife shot upward for the deadly blow, and the golden curls were twined about the hilt.

"Never!"

Weatherford's arm quickly followed the determined exclamation, and Merciless Matt saw myriads of stars dance before his eyes as he reeled and fell to the earth like a stricken pine.

"Thus Weatherford keeps his secret," said the proud

Creek, as he turned, and with a haughty step left the spot. "The Creeks would worship Weatherford as the pale-faces worship their Great Spirit, if he would carry Merciless Matt's scalp into their camp. But, these hands can not shed the White Slayer's blood, nor can these eagle eyes behold him die by other hands. He may exterminate Weatherford's people, but the Red Thunderbolt will not harm a hair of his head. An arrow pierced Weatherford's heart when his solid and went forth."

Almost before the great Creek sachem had passed through the suburb of his camp, Matthew Dean opened his eyes, and rose to his feet.

His first glance fell upon the golden scalp.

"What secret does that half-breed's heart contain?" he cried, throwing his gaze aloft. "Oh, God, spare my life until I have torn it from him! Does Myra live with her scalp in my hands? No, no, it can not be; and yet, the spark of hope burns in my breast. Weatherford, I will wring that secret from you. Why did you not bear me to your tribe, and let your crimson hounds tear my heart out as they yearn to do? Why?"

Could Merciless Matt have heard Weatherford's words, he would have wondered the more at the chief's inexplicable action.

As he left the spot with Myra's scalp nestling near his heart, he yearned for the surprise. Then he would meet the Red Thunderbolt again. He was satisfied that the Creeks knew naught regarding their encompassment by the American forces.

CHAPTER III.

RED THUNDERBOLT'S TRAIL.

BEFORE the flush of dawn illuminated the Creek encampment, and while the stars twinkled in the azure vault of heaven, the yell of General Coffee's soldiers broke the stillness, and the startled red men sprung to their weapons to

find themselves hemmed in on every side by men whose terrible battle-cry, "Remember Fort Mimms!" floated skyward.

The attack was executed as it had been planned by the indomitable Coffee, and though the Creeks stood their ground like Spartans, it was in vain. The stern, revengeful militia of Tennessee and Georgia were not to be repulsed, and the ranks filled with the best blood of the South were not to be broken. Now, here was heard the voice of Weatherford urging his men to actions of a most daring nature; now there his rifle spoke, and some valiant mountaineer of Tennessee went to the ground in the agonies of death.

The friendly Creeks and Cherokees mingled with the troops, and plied the scalping-knife, as they handled the deadly Indian rifle.

"It is strange! Does some fate shield him with its protecting wings? Has it been decreed that that secret shall never be known by me? Shall the instigator of the butchery of Fort Mimms go unpunished? So it seems. The men say he bears a charmed life. They have fired at him repeatedly, and yet his voice soars above the noise of the battle. Ha! there he is. Yes, I see him at last."

With the last word Matt Dean sprung from the spot where he had paused to reload his rifle, and his eyes flashed fire as they fell upon the man from whom he would wring a secret before driving the knife to his heart. He had sought Weatherford from the commencement of the attack, but some fate seemed to protect the half-breed; and, before the avenger gained the spot where the chief fought, the giant had vanished. But now he saw him again, and he knew that if he failed to reach him then, they would meet no more during the conflict, for the savages had become panic-stricken and were flying in every direction.

Imitating the veteran marshals at Waterloo, the Red Thunderbolt was trying to stem the current of defeat, and drive his followers once more to the strife; but, he might as well have tried to arrest the irresistible course of the avalanche.

Merciless Matt at length found himself in proximity to Weatherford, who had separated himself from his warriors, and leaned against a tree, calmly surveying the scene of his people's disaster.

The flush of morning was appearing over the high banks of the Coosa, and the features of white and red-men were easily distinguishable. Some vengeful soldier's hand had applied a torch to one of the birchen wigwams, and the fire and smoke added horribly to the warlike scene.

The Creek's eye seemed to wander over the whole landscape before him, yet he was not noting any particular object, for he had relapsed into a reverie which might prove his doom.

Suddenly Merciless Matt, who had executed a flank movement in an incredibly short space of time, clutched his enemy's shoulder, and roused him from his reverie with an abruptness that for a moment threw Weatherford's mind from its equilibrium.

Notwithstanding that Matt still clung to his Creek garments, the Red Thunderbolt instantly recognized him.

"I've got you now, Weatherford!" cried Dean, as with all his strength, and a suddenness unexpected by his red foe, he hurled him to the ground, and planted himself upon his brawny breast. "I've hunted you for the last hour, but now the fates have deserted you, and you are in my power. Now, Weatherford, tell me that secret before I slay you—tell me, does my daughter—my Myra—live?"

The prostrate chief laughed triumphantly as he looked up into the powder-begrimed face of his avenging foe, and a terrible anathema of rage and disappointment parted Dean's lips.

"White Slayer kill Weatherford," said the chief, "and then his secret goes with him to the Manitou's lodge. Ah, if White Slayer knew who Weatherford is, he would sheath his knife, and bid him fly with his defeated braves. But strike pale man—half-breed!"

"What!" cried Matt Dean, casting a look of astonishment into Weatherford's eyes. "I'm not a half-breed, though my skin is somewhat tanned."

"Weatherford never lies!" was the rejoinder. "Is the White Slayer afraid to kill the great chief of the Creeks?"

The Indian's words were couched in a sarcastic and bitter tone, and while it caused a flash of anger to light up Merciless Matt's eyes, the knife did not descend.

For the giant Creek hurled him from him as though he was a kitten, and when the avenger recovered his feet his antagonist was not in sight.

"He could vanquish a lion!" exclaimed Merciless Matt, looking around, bewildered with astonishment. "I thought I was a match for any human in the Territory, but I'm a kitten in *his* arms. He saw I was going to strike, and what he could have accomplished at the start he did then. And yet again when he could have rid the world of me at one blow, he leaves me unharmed! What is this mystery? What am I to that red-skin? He said that if I knew *who* he was I would not seek his life. He lies! he lies! He called me a half-breed; that, too, is a lie. Nobody ever dubbed me that before. Nobody ever dared to. Hold! don't shoot, Len Marion: it's me—Matt Dean. I'm not a Creek!"

His words were addressed to a young man, whose rifle was covering the White Slayer with a fatal aim.

"Come here, I want to see you."

The soldier lowered his weapon and approached Dean, upon whose face something like a scowl had settled, and grew darker as Len Marion came nearer. It was evident that the avenger did not think kindly of the youthful frontiersman.

"Couldn't you see that I wasn't a Creek?" asked Dean, snappishly, fastening his dark eyes upon the young man. "You never looked at this medal on my breast, nor noticed this red feather in my cap? Perhaps you knew naught of Coffee's orders," and there was a momentary softening of the ranger's stern expression.

"I was aware of his orders, but—but, Matt—"

"Let the 'buts' be, Len Marion," interrupted Dean. "Did you notice my combat with that red devil?" and he glanced toward the Coosa.

"No, I just come up. Did you finish him?"

The questioner's gaze fell upon the ground, as though he searched for the body of the White Slayer's late foe.

"No," replied Dean, the old rage and disappointment coming back. "Weatherford is stronger than twenty men."

"What! did you have a tussle with the Red Thunderbolt?" cried Lenius Marion, and his hands closed tighter and

tighter until the nails pierced the skin of his palms. "Gods ! I'd like to meet him once. He killed—"

He paused abruptly and started back, his eyes riveted upon the man who stood before him, and shot him a withering look of scorn.

"Don't *you* speak *her* name !" hissed Matt Dean. "Coward lips shall not breathe it in my presence."

A flash of indignation flitted across the young frontiersman's face, and his form shook like the aspen's leaf ; but he calmed the storm that swept his heart, and answered the words hurled into his teeth without regard to his feelings :

"I stood beside her until I was stricken down by Weatherford's tomahawk—who could have defended her longer ? Not yourself, nor any man, Matt Dean. I care not what they who escaped with me have told you. They may not have seen me fall, but were she alive she would exonerate me from the charge of cowardice, and tell you that I defended your loved ones to the bitter end. 'Twere sweet to die at her side, and I curse the half-drunken chief, because he did not throw more force into the blow. I've told you this a dozen times, Matt Dean, and you dub me liar and poltroon. Were you not her father I had resented your insult long ago. When next you encounter Weatherford, question him regarding my actions at Fort Mimms, and if he does not exonerate me of your imputations, then am I the veriest coward and liar on God's footstool. It will all be made plain, some day."

For a moment Merciless Matt gazed into the young man's eyes ; but Marion met his gaze with unflinching fortitude, and at length the avenger spoke :

"If I could hear Myra say that your words were true, then, Len Marion, I'd believe," he said ; "but, sir, certain men, whom I respect, have said that you shirked the fight, and you can not confirm your words by witnesses."

"Who were these men ?"

"I'll not tell you," was the reply. "But enough of this. I said I wanted to see you. I do. Did you ever hear that I was a half-breed ?"

"No, but, Matt—"

"No 'buts,' I said a minute ago. That chief called me a

half-breed. He lies, an' I'm going to cram the lie down his throat some o' these days. Len Marion, I had a tussle with him last night."

"And he vanquished you, then?"

"Yes, but he left me something by which to remember him, and the bloodiest day God ever created."

"F'or God's sake, Matt, what was it?"

The avenger's hand crept slowly, like the wounded snake, to his bosom.

Len Marion watched intently, and with a strange, anxious, yet fearful, curiosity.

"He gave me this," and the golden scalp was held up to the young frontiersman's view.

"Oh, God! *her* scalp!" cried Len Marion, his face losing its color, and his hands stretching forth to grasp the long yellow curls, so beautiful in the beams of the rising sun.

"Back! *you* shall not touch *her* hair!" cried Matt Dean, drawing the golden scalp toward him as though the touch of the handsome young soldier was deadly contagion. "I gave my consent for you to marry her once; but now I'd almost kill you before I'd let you kiss her hair."

"Oh, this is cruel, Matt Dean," said the youth, "as cruel as the grave. Why won't you believe me? I loved her once as my life; I love her, though dead, as dearly still. Had the Indians have withheld their fire an hour that fatal day we would have been man and wife; but, they came upon us while she was dressing for the wedding. Oh, God, why did I not die at her side?"

With a groan Len Marion covered his face with his hands, and for a moment Merciless Matt contemplated him with a look of pity. But the cold, stern expression returned, and he murmured, in a tone intended for no ears save his own:

"You might have died there, if you had not run!"

When Len Marion looked up again the golden scalp had vanished, and again that cold look of disbelief was upon Matt Dean's face.

"Do you believe her dead?" he asked.

"How can I believe otherwise when men who saw her fall have told me so, and when I behold her scalp given to you by the red demon who led the butcherers?"

"But he bade me hope."

"Matt Dean, you're crazy!" cried the young man, springing forward and clutching the avenger's arm. "You're tampering with my poor heart now. You're as cruel, as merciless as hell itself."

"I don't sport on such a subject as this, boy," said Matt, sternly. "Weatherford didn't just tell me to hope that Myra was not dead, but he possesses some great secret regarding her an' me, an' it has raised my hope."

"What! Myra not dead!" cried the young man. "Oh, God grant that she still lives—for me!"

A scowl descended upon Matt Dean's face.

"Not for you, boy—she shouldn't marry a fellow what deserted her in the time of need, for the world. If she's to wed you, I hope she's dead."

"No, no, don't hope that, Matt!" cried Marion, shocked at the avenger's words. "I'll retract the last part of my sentence. I hope she lives for *you*. Now I have a further desire to live. I shall track that Creek sachem to his hiding-places, and I will wring that secret from him. I want to prove your informers to be liars of the lowest kind. By finding your child I can do it. I had enemies in Fort Mimms; your child had other lovers there than I. Have you told anybody save myself about the scalp?"

"No. Why?"

"Then tell no one; especially breathe no word of it to Rafe Ringbolt."

"Why?"

"He wanted your child."

"He—the lowest dog in the fort?"

"He—the scum of the vat of iniquity," replied Marion. "For God's sake don't tell him that your daughter may be alive."

"That's pretty talk, but it won't go down, boy," responded Matt, with an incredulous smile. "And, besides, Rafe's dead—the Creeks killed him on the Tombigbee."

"He is not dead. I saw him last night."

"*You?* Where?"

"Over the river. I was a spy, too, last night."

For a moment Matthew Dean was silent, and when he looked upon the youth again he spoke:

"I'm going to unravel Weatherford's secret, an' I'm going alone, too."

"God give you success," said the young man. "I would like to accompany you."

"No, Len Marion," cried Merciless Matt; "men never known to lie swear that you basely deserted my little household when the Indians' tomahawks flashed around them, and whom one true arm might have saved. I want no cowards with me!"

As the White Slayer turned abruptly on his heel, the whirlwind of resentment that swept over the accused one's heart, drove his hand to the pistols in his belt.

"No, no, I'll not end your tauntings with the ball," he said, after sober, second thought. "But, I'll make you ask my forgiveness on bended knees yet, Matt Dean. Myra, alive! Oh, God! do not raise my hopes only to hurl them down, down into the abyss of the blackness of despair!"

With the last word he turned away, and sought a group of soldiers on another part of Tallushatchee's ensanguined field.

When Weatherford sprung from the ground after hurling Merciless Matt from him, he ran like the deer until he had joined his fleeing braves, whom, singular to record, the victors did not follow. The power of the great chief was wounded, but far from dead. He could bring six thousand warriors into the field, independent of the vast numbers of Cherokees who had proffered their aid. Tallushatchee would serve to rouse the red nations, and ere long he would be in the field again at the head of an army irresistible in power and prowess. In the eyes of the Indians, Weatherford, or the Red Thunderbolt, was a half-breed, though his skin indicated a preponderance of Indian blood. His mother was a Seminole princess, but while his father was supposed to have been a Creek, still no Creek knew any thing regarding him. One morning the babe, Weatherford, was found in the council-house of the Creeks, and after awhile his mother claimed him, declared his father to be a Creek chief, who had fallen in a late Indian battle, and he became one of that mighty nation.

Weatherford knew his father, as the sequel of our romance will show.

He reached the banks of the Coosa a few rods in advance of his beaten followers, and sprung into a canoe which seemed to have been secreted for an emergency. With a look of regret upon his braves, he seized the lithe oars and darted down the murky current with the rapidity of a rocket. A bend in the stream soon hid him from view, and the rapid speed of the boat soon brought him to the mouth of a tributary, a short distance above which roared and plunged a cataract.

"Weatherford will seek peace in the eyes of his poor queen," muttered the Creek, guiding his canoe toward the shore. "The pale-faces have driven him from Tallushatchee, but he will turn upon them, and they shall fly before him as the leaves of the forest fly before the northern blast. They can bend Weatherford, but they can never break him, never ! While he rests with Snowflake, Little Tomahawk will fire the warriors' hearts."

Springing from his boat, the chief scrutinized the vicinity of the cataract, then lifted the bark from the water and bore it toward the fall, springing from rock to rock until the white spray was dashed against his face.

At the eastern side of the fall Weatherford paused. Just before him the sheet of water that poured over the precipice far above his plumed head, was thin and transparent, and indicated the presence of a grotto beyond its whiteness.

The Creek regarded for a moment this beautiful natural display, then sprung from the great flat rock whereon he had planted himself, pierced the sheet of lucent water, and disappeared !

CHAPTER IV.

A FEARFUL MISTAKE.

THE avenger, leaving Len Marion, sauntered over the battle-field, seemingly with no object in view. One hundred and eighty-six warriors lay on the ensanguined soil, and unfortunately to that number were added about twenty women and children. The defeated Creeks had retreated in the direction of Taledaga, their great town, and the home of Weatherford. There they would make a desperate resistance, and General Coffee knew that his force was insufficient to attack them again.

Merciless Matt followed close in the rear of the retreating savages. He threw himself upon their trail long before sundown, and in time caught sight of the rear guard. Quite a number of wounded were borne from Tallushatchee's ill-fated field, and now and then one was left beside the trail to die. At nightfall the savages left the river, and plunged into the woods, thus describing a bee-line toward their rendezvous, situated about half-way between the Coosa and Tallapoosa. They did not halt to cook a repast, but devoured their parched corn and dried meat as they hurried along, the women and children keeping pace with the warriors with admirable promptitude.

"What's become of Weatherford?" murmured Matt Dean, as he strode through the gloomy forest. "He usually guards the rear, the post of danger, in an affair like this, but he ain't thar now, that's certain. Speckled Snake is doing that duty, an' Little Tomahawk leads the van. Mebbe— Who's coming this way?"

The avenger suddenly sprung behind a giant cottonwood. An approaching footstep had greeted his ear, and as he gained the tree his knife flashed from his girdle.

"Some wounded red-skin has stolen from the gang to die alone," he muttered, while he waited in the gloom, for the person was coming directly toward him. "An' ef he don't

die mighty soon of his own accord, I'll finish him, an' take his scalp to Weatherford's tent."

Still nearer came the footstep, while those made by the retreating army grew indistinct in the distance, and finally died away altogether.

The tread denoted the approach of a lightly-built Indian, and soon the figure was opposite the waiting foe. He put forth his hand only to awaken a startling cry through the dark aisles of the woods.

"A woman, by Heaven!" exclaimed the avenger, still retaining his grip on the slender arm. "What brought you here, girl?" and he tried to catch the contour of the face his eyes almost touched. But the darkness prevented him. Still he knew that he confronted a woman, for he had laid his hand on her long hair, and glided it over her smooth face.

"Yes, girl, why didn't ye keep on with the Injuns?" he asked, again receiving no response to his last question. "Ye are not hurt, are ye?"

The answer came at last in tones that proclaimed the speaker near the jaws of death, and while she spoke her fragile form trembled like the storm-shaken reed.

"The Red Robin of the Creeks was stealing back to the Coosa to die. The ball of the pale-faces pierced her side, and if she goes further toward Taledaga, she will sink to the ground, spiritless. On the banks of the Coosa her mother sung her to sleep, and beside that noble river will she perish. Pale-face, let the Robin's arm go free; let her seek the Coosa."

"Girl, ye ain't able to go a hundred yards further," said Matt Dean, "nor am I going to let ye go. Here, lie down on these leaves, an' I'll make a fire if it brings the hull of your tribe down upon me. I hate the men, not the women."

The girl made no resistance when the avenger tenderly took her in his arms and placed her on a pile of leaves which he had hastily scraped together. A groan escaped her lips as she touched the downy couch, and Matthew Dean began to collect some dry boughs.

Presently a little blaze illumined the immediate vicinity, and lighted up the most beautiful Indian face the avenger had ever beheld.

The girl—for girl in form and feature was the Red Robin—had not yet seen her twentieth summer, but there was a beauty about her, which the intense pain she had endured and was still enduring could not drive away. Her large eyes looked the thanks she could not utter, and she pressed Merciless Matt's hands with a fervor that sent a painful expression across his face, and for a moment the strong man turned his head away.

"I ain't strong enough to see a woman die," he muttered acknowledging his weakness. "Somehow or other they always bring the water to my eyes, an' make me a perfect baby. If I had the fellar here what shot this innocent creature, there'd be another funeral in these woods. What, girl?"

A groan from the Robin's lips drew the interrogative from Dean; but the Indian did not speak.

"Poor thing; she can't speak," he muttered, seeing the convulsive efforts on the part of the Indian girl to articulate. "I'd give my right arm just to hear her last words. My flask! Why did I forget it?"

His hand suddenly flew to his bosom, from which he drew a tin flask.

"I guess there's but a few swallows left," he said, placing it to the Red Robin's lips. "I give most of it to a dying fellar on the battle-field, and he'd 'a' emptied it of death hadn't stopped his throat. Drink, girl; it's good for ye. Gods! the red-skins have got an awful ways ahead. They'll be to Taledaga, p'r'aps, afore I git started ag'in'."

The Indian girl drained the flask in a few moments, and the "fire-water" had the desired effect. It revived her, and the avenger heard her voice again.

"The Red Robin will not forget the pale-face," she said. "He is kinder to her than Weatherford."

The last words sent a thrill to Matt Dean's heart.

"What is the Red Thunderbolt to you, girl?"

"My father."

"Your father?"

"Yes; the Red Robin is his only child."

"He has no wife now?"

"No," with a sigh, "but—but—more fire-water."

"Gods! it's all gone, girl," said Dean, with a groan of dis-

appointment, as he inverted the flask against the palm of his hand. "I wish it had been full. What! the blood comin' up in your throat again? Jest like Zeke Hartman afore he died. Lay still, you won't die yet awhile. I'll hunt water. You want to say something important; I feel it in my bones."

The girl, with a futile effort to speak, nodded assent to the avenger's words, and springing to his feet he started off with a torch to search for water. He knew that the forest abounded in springs and streams in various portions of its fastnesses, and, after a lengthy search, he managed to fill his canteen or flask with the healthful fluid.

"Now she'll say what she wanted to," he muttered, in triumph, as he turned toward the fire he had kindled, "and p'r'aps she knows all about her father's secret!"

He found the Red Robin trying to expel the flood of gore which had collected in her throat, and a copious administration of the water brought almost immediate relief.

"Now, girl, tell me what ye was goin' to," cried Matt, grasping her hand, and bending over her with an anxious look. "You said your father had no squaw now but—what is the rest?"

"He has a squaw."

"Is she a Creek?"

"No—he found her among the pale-faces, and he has hidden her away among the great woods that kiss the Coosa. Her head is cracked."

"A crazy queen," murmured Matt. "Tell me where she is, girl. I'm finding out his secret now. I feel that his queen is—tell me, girl."

He was smoothing the Robin's brow with his great but tender hand, and while he spoke he felt the death sweat beneath his palm.

"Down under—the—"

"What?"

"The—pale-face—"

"Here, Robin!"

"Where are—you?"

"Here—here—quick! where is the crazy queen?"

"Down—water—Coosa—" a groan.

A death-stare took possession of the lustrous eyes; the forehead became beaded with cold sweat, and Matt Dean's hand slid therefrom.

"Well, she didn't git to tell it after all," said the settler, with disappointment. "She would have told it, though. 'Down under'—down under what? She didn't mean a drink of water when she said 'water' the last time. Her father's queen is near some water, an' I'm goin' to find her. If Myra lives, she is Weatherford's crazy queen, an' I'd almost as soon find her dead as crazy. But—heavens!"

As he uttered the exclamation he started back with his eyes almost starting from their sockets, riveted upon the body before him.

One of the hands had moved convulsively among the leaves, and the eyes, having moved in their orbits, were looking directly at him.

"Not dead? Thank God!"

He seized his canteen, but it was empty, and a moment later he was flying through the forest, toward the stream.

It was the work of a moment for the avenger to fill his flask, but when he reached his dying fire an exclamation of horror escaped his lips

The leafy couch was tenantless!

And, afar in the dark forest, he heard the hurrying flight of the giant panther—the spotted king of the Alabama woods!

"The spotted devil was waitin' for this!" cried Matt, while he listened to the sounds each moment growing less distinct. "Curse the night-prowler! Curse Matt Dean for not looking around for watchers! Curse—oh, curse the counterfeit of death!"

For a moment he stood motionless, speechless, and then picked up his gun.

"I reckon I can foller the whipped Creeks again," he muttered, "an' what I failed to get out o' that dying girl, I must force from her father. 'Down under'—*what?*"

Again he threw himself upon the trail of the fugitive Creeks, and during the following day looked down upon Taledaga and its excited populace from a secret spot.

He dare not enter the village in the broad glare of the

sun ; but, when the night shades came he left his retreat. Still clothed in the garb of a Creek warrior, he moved forward in a stooping posture, now and then progressing on all-fours.

Matt Dean had visited Taledaga during peaceful times, and knew the exact situation of Weatherford's lodge. To prevent a surprise, sentries had been posted around the town—a caution which Weatherford had neglected, to his sorrow, at Tallushatchee. But the disguised avenger approached several sentries, and took the life of each with the silence that characterized his visits to the Creek camps. Then, with three fresh scalps in his girdle, he crept forward, and at length crouched before the door of the Red Thunderbolt's lodge.

The Indians seemed to have forgotten Tallushatchee in slumber, for not a sound save the baying of the dogs came to Dean's ears, trained to catch the slightest noise.

Slowly, silently he parted the curtains, and in the light of the moon that came down through the open apex of the wigwam, the avenger beheld the stalwart chief slumbering on a couch, his head turned from the door.

At once advancing, Dean leaned over Weatherford's couch ; then his lips slowly neared the Indian's ear.

“ Red Thunderbolt ! ”

As the words left the White Slayer's lips, he sprung back, and fastened his black eyes upon the savage.

A cry of astonishment, mingled with chagrin, burst from Dean's throat.

He had awakened *Little Tomahawk*, to whom, for the present, as the reader has seen, Weatherford had given the command of his braves !

The avenger was quick in recovering his equilibrium, but not quick enough for Little Tomahawk.

The chief had recognized him in an instant, and a moment later they were struggling with the ferocity of tigers, for the mastery.

Little Tomahawk threw his long arms around the settler, thus depriving him of the use of his knife, and it was in vain that Dean tried to free himself from the troublesome embrace.

Without a word, but with their hot breath on each other's

cheeks, they swayed hither and thither, now rolling over and over on the ground, now again on their feet. Little Tomahawk's arms remained locked around the avenger's body, and at last Dean found himself for a moment beyond the door.

A yell from little Tomahawk would have summoned five thousand warriors to his assistance, but the chief would have the honor of capturing the White Slayer single-handed.

The struggle without the lodge attracted the attention of several Indian dogs, and their cries soon summoned a multitude of their canine brethren to the spot. They sprung upon the antagonists, snapping and snarling, until some warriors drove them away.

Then the struggle came to an abrupt termination.

Merciless Matt found himself roughly seized, and Little Tomahawk suddenly released him from his embrace.

"Ha! ha! ha!" laughed the chief; "at last the White Slayer has fallen into hands as unsparing as his. He has crept for the last time into the Creeks' lodges—he has made his last mark on a Creek's head."

A Pandemonium of yells followed when Matt's identity was discovered. The feathers were torn from his head, the war-dress of the Creek stripped from his painted body, and he found himself borne directly toward the stake, situate upon a gigantic artificial mound in the center of the Indian town.

Fully seven thousand men, women and children were frantic with joy over the capture of the long-hunted White Slayer, whom they feared more than Watchemenetoc, the Evil Spirit.

Merciless Matt maintained a dogged silence while he was hurried over the ground, and whichever way he looked a sea of plumed heads and unpitying faces encountered his eye. He towered a head above the tallest of his captors, whose scarlet ranks he scanned as though searching for a particular form.

At last the base of the death-mound was gained!

CHAPTER V.

RAFE RINGBOLT MAKES A DISCOVERY.

Two months prior to the massacre of Fort Minnms, Ringbolt, serving at the fortification in the capacity of a private soldier, had committed a crime for which he had been drummed from the spot, and sought refuge among the Indians who were unearthing the hatchet. Prior to his dastardly deed, which we need not mention here, he had borne a character equal to that of any private soldier, and was possessed of a faultless figure, and comparatively handsome face. But now the lowest of base epithets were applied to his name, and the whites were rejoiced to learn that he had fallen beneath the red-skin's tomahawk. For when he left the fort he swore that he would return, some day, with clouds of warriors, and take summary vengeance upon them.

What young Marion averred he had witnessed in the Creek camp, the night prior to the carnage at Tallushatchee, Merciless Matt had flung back into his teeth with scathing words, and hooted at the idea that the disgraced soldier loved his daughter.

Marion's vision had not deceived him. During his visit to the Creek forces, he had stood by the young renegade's side, while he fired the hearts of a concourse of savages.

The reports of Ringbolt's death therefore were canards, probably the inventions of the poltroon himself, that he might the better execute certain vengeful designs.

Had Len Marion followed him at the conclusion of his harangue, he might have been a witness of the startling scenes to be recorded in the present chapter.

"Now is my time!" murmured the renegade, as he stole toward the gloomy banks of the Coosa, ever and anon glancing over his shoulder toward the fire around which sat Weatherford and his prominent sachems. "He won't visit his secret place for some time, and now, if ever, I must settle my doubts. That Indian don't seek the vicinity of the Man-

itor's Falls so often for nothing. Time and again I've trailed the half-breed devil there, and he has vanished from my eyes so mysteriously that it seems that he was in league with spirits. Something irresistible attracts him to that spot, and I've a pretty clear idea what that something is. If it's what I think it is, my conclusions are correct. What attracts Weatherford to the falls possesses a charm for me, and if I hadn't got drunk and acted the fool, she'd 'a' been mine long afore this."

Thus he communed with himself while he hurried toward the Chocoma, and all at once he made the startling discovery that he was very near the line of United States troops.

"They've caught the Injuns napping this time," he muttered, "and I had best leave the diggings before they contract their ranks, for it's as plain as day to me that Weatherford is hemmed in on all sides. I might spoil Jackson's little game by sneaking back and telling the chief all; but then, such a course mightn't prove just the healthiest thing for *my* plans. No, no; a good whipping will learn the redskins something, and dearly-bought lessons do the most good."

Bringing all his subtlety into action, the renegade avoided the troops, and reached the river, determined to leave his savage allies to their fate.

Then down through the starlight that slept upon that romantic stream, the renegade glided in his canoe, with so little noise that the birds were not frightened from their nests among the trees above him.

He plied the lithe paddles with dexterity, and suddenly the volleys of musketry fell dim and indistinctly upon his ears.

"They're at it a'ready," he cried, for the first time speaking aloud, "and there can be but one termination of the muss. Weatherford will run to his haunt—that's certain, and that'll just suit Rafe Ringbolt! I'll take my station in the woods opposite the falls, and I'll see how that half-Injun gets out of the way so quickly."

While he plied the oars, the noise of Tallushatchee's conflict grew less distinct, and finally it died away altogether.

At length the renegade ran his canoe to that bank of the

river opposite the Manitou's Falls, and carried it into the wood. Then, selecting a tree whose foliage could not well be pierced by human eye, he drew himself up among the branches, and pulled his light bark after him.

"Now I'm ready for discovery," he said, looking from the falls up the stream. "And I won't have long to wait, either. Whenever Weatherford's in trouble, I've noticed that he always seeks some certain spot in this vicinity, and when he returns to us Injuns, he's another man."

Then a silence of many minutes followed, and at last a cry burst from the renegade's lips, and his eyes flashed upon a canoe flying down the river.

"The battle's ag'in' ye," he said, his eyes fastened on the form of Weatherford in the boat; "and now ye come to your old place for consolation! Ha! he looks this way, but sees nothing. I'd be apt to stop a bullet if he knew I were here."

Then, in silence, Rafe Ringbolt watched the Creek sachem guide his boat toward the falls; saw him bear it on his shoulder to the foamy foot of the cataract, and uttered a cry of astonishment when the chief pierced the sheet of water, and disappeared from his vision.

"There, I've solved the mystery at last! Ye ain't in league with spirits, after all, Weatherford, and time has proved that Rafe Ringbolt is the harder diamond. Now I'll wait till ye leave the den, and then I'll pay its inmates a visit. I can swear who's beyond *that* water."

Rafe Ringbolt's patience was forced to undergo a severe trial, for he saw the sun rise and set without beholding Weatherford emerge from the cataract.

Was the Creek still in the cavern, or had he sped toward Taledaga through a corridor unknown to the renegade?

These and similarly perplexing interrogatives were troubling the solitary watcher, when he had the relief and satisfaction of seeing the Creek appear upon the flat rock with his canoe.

The orb of day had long disappeared, and the twilight was swiftly following.

Weatherford was not apprehensive of espionage now, for he did not scrutinize the vicinity of the falls, but launched his boat on the Coosa, and was soon out of sight.

A few minutes after the Creek's disappearance, Rafe Ringbolt and his canoe dropped from the cottonwood, and presently he stood upon the flat rock lately occupied by Weatherford.

The sides of the stone were rough and jagged, and to one of the points the renegade succeeded in mooring his boat.

The next moment he had pierced the water, and found himself in a gloomy place, but upon dry ground.

Then he began to grope his way forward, now striking the stony ceiling which forced him upon all-fours, now walking erect down a Stygian corridor, whose ceiling he could touch with his hands.

By-and-by the noise of the cataract was scarcely distinguishable, and when it had died away entirely, the sound of human voices and the glimmer of a fire attracted his senses.

"I'm on the right track," he murmured, and the light told him that the threading of a short corridor would bring him upon the speaker.

At length the end of the corridor was gained; but before the renegade could thrust his eyes around the angle, to note the tenantry and arrangement of the large apartment into which it opened, a dark object shut off the light, and alighted upon his breast, with the well-known and soul-chilling shriek of the panther!

The renegade sunk back with a startling curse, and, in the moment of danger, forgetting his knife, threw his hands to the mad beast's throat.

Rafe Ringbolt possessed a terrible grip, and the panther gasped for breath as they struggled in the corridor. As yet the teeth of the brute had not injured him, but its claws had laid bare his thick breast-bone, and his garments hung about him in shreds.

Quickly following his first ejaculation of horror, a woman's shriek echoed throughout the cavern, but now no noise save that occasioned by his terrible struggle for life reached the renegade's ears.

After a desperate combat, he forced the spotted beast into the large apartment, which he knew lay beyond the corridor, and there, in the advantage of a moment, he got a blow at his antagonist's heart.

Rafe Ringbolt seldom struck twice, and a death-s'ivet passed over the panther's frame when he withdrew his knife reddened by blood.

With the victory the victor's strength vanished, and he lay upon the bloody stones as helpless as the babe newly born. He saw that the cavern was now empty, but many evidences of late tenantry manifested themselves.

"God and devils, what a fight!" groaned Rafe, as he raised himself on his elbow, after many desperate struggles. "I want no more of this, and— gods! what a giant!" his eyes alighting on the huge brute he had slain. "And here I am, nearly pegged out and no gal. Life and furies! ain't it provoking? Why— The good Lord have mercy on me now!"

His eyes were almost starting from their bloody sockets, and fastened upon a figure that was bounding toward him with uplifted tomahawk.

The shape was that of a woman—a giantess in stature, beaded and snowy-plumed, and possessing features that proclaimed her a full-blooded Creek.

She did not pause until she had reached the renegade's side, and the next moment he found himself jerked to his feet, with a brutality that drew a shriek of pain from his heart.

"Ha! ha! ha!" laughed the Indian, dragging him toward the fire. "Creek brave come to Nowedah's cave, but the wild dog tear him up. What he come for? What! He no Creek! He pale-face!" and a cry of astonishment pealed from Nowedah's lips, as she caught sight of Ringbolt's pale-skinned arm.

For a moment her dark eyes flashed upon him, and her hand still retained its grip, else the renegade had fallen, perhaps into the fire.

"Snowflake!"

The word came forth without warning, and was answered by a light cry some distance from the twain.

The next moment a light figure sprung into the mellow firelight, and Rafe Ringbolt saw that the face before him was as pale as the leaves of the water-lilies, and the eyes emitted a light which he had not seen flash from human orbs for many a long year. The new-comer was fantastically arrayed

in the skins of the snowy fox. Not a somber shade relieved the whiteness of her garments, but the renegade caught a glimpse of auburn hair, stealing from beneath her snowy plume. She shrunk back when near the renegade, but a word from Nowedah infused new courage into her timid heart, and she crouched before Ringbolt with a perceptible shudder.

"How like yet how *very* unlike Myra Dean!" murmured the outlaw, with his eyes fixed upon the face of the girl. "But yet I think 'tis she; but good God! her mind is completely gone—as crazy as a trapped mouse."

The girl's voice was not needed to confirm the supposition of the man, for the eyes which were fastened upon Ringbolt, with a stare terribly akin to lunacy, told their story only too truly.

"Indian no more pick flowers," said the girl, at last turning to Nowedah. "Snowflake has gathered all the pretty lilies and put them into her boat. Pretty soon she sails to her palace across the silver sea. Poor Indian! no flowers for him," and her look suddenly fell upon Ringbolt—this time expressive of pity.

Nowedah did not reply to the girl's words, but bade her begone, and, springing to her feet, Snowflake bounded from the cavern.

"Who is that girl?" questioned Rafe Ringbolt, a moment later, in the Creek tongue.

"No! no! no!" cried the Indian woman, fire flashing from her large eyes. "So the pale-face sought Weatherford's white queen? And he has killed the tame wild dog, too! Now Nowedah will send the queen-hunter upon that trail that terminates in the lodge of the Watchemenetoc. Nowedah guards Weatherford's hidden home. When the Red Thunderbolt returns she will tell him how the queen-hunter came to his cave and went away. Ha! ha! ha! he will never hunt pale queen again."

The laugh was the incarnation of fiendishness, and before the last word had left her lips, Rafe Ringbolt found himself elevated above her plumed head, and borne across the chamber at a rapid gait.

CHAPTER VI

STRANGE EVENTS.

“A FELLOW can never die but once, an’ I’m a-going to show you cowardly red-hides how Matt Dean can shove his boat off—be hanged ef I ain’t ! I don’t blame ye for torturing Matt Dean, now that you have got him. It’s nothing but just retaliation, an’ I’m not the man to growl about *that*.”

Thus spoke Merciless Matt while several brawny red-skins bound him to the fatal stake, that crowned the summit of the death-mound. This acclivity served the Creeks as the famous Black Mountain in Ohio served the Shawnees in the early history of the Buckeye State. Taledaga was surrounded by many minor villages, whose inhabitants could enjoy the spectacle of the fiery death without leaving their lodges.

It was near midnight when Matt Dean found himself fastened to the blackened stake. During the march thereto, infuriated hags had torn the clothing from his person, and were allowed to sear the skin from his back and strong arms with sickory withes and bundles of young thorns. He bore this torture without a groan, and once or twice he raised his hand as though he would strike his tormentors, but the rope kept his iron muscles at his side.

At the stake several chiefs who knew that the prisoner was “something” to Weatherford, and others, who feared to torture a captive without the sanction of the Creek “emperor,” attempted to gain a respite ; but the warriors and hags drowned their words, and threatened their lives if they did not desist.

“Little Tomahawk is the ruler ef Taledaga when the Red Thunderbolt is away, and what he does Weatherford is satisfied with.”

“Why did Weatherford desert his Braves ?” cried a warrior. “He should be here now, and not with Nowedah.”

At this a strange light flashed in Matt Dan’s orbs, and he fastened them upon the speaker.

"Yes, yes, my Myra lives, and he calls her Nowedah. Now, I don't want to die! Oh, God, no! I want to live to tear Nowedah from him. I will live!"

As he uttered the last words he summoned all his strength in a Herculean effort to burst the sinews that bound him to the stake.

But they resisted his struggles, and at length he was compelled to give over amid the derisive yells of the thousands that surrounded him.

"Now, then, go on with your burnin'!" he hissed. "What!" when his eyes reverted to the savages again, "going to peel me, eh?"

Yes, the Indians intended to skin the avenger alive, but that dreadful operation was never inaugurated. Little Tomahawk would listen to no such procedure, and the would-be flayers drew back and muttered imprecations upon the baffling of their plans.

Then the fagots at the foot of the stake were ignited, and for a minute the form of the doomed man was enveloped in smoke. But, the savages chased this away with their blankets, and a chorus of demoniac yells announced the inauguration of the fiery doom.

Matthew Dean gave up all now. With the red fire scorching his limbs, and seven thousand enemies around him, he might well despair. In all the assemblage of fiends he could not encounter one pitying eye, nor note the uplifting of a helping hand.

But, assistance for the White Slayer was not far distant. For an hour a solitary Indian had been bounding through the trackless forests, skirting the dark morass, leaping over tiny streams—coming toward Taledaga.

At length his eyes fell upon the scene on the death-knoll, and a minute later a startling cry broke from the lips of the white man's torturers:

"The Red Thunderbolt!"

Like magic the red ranks parted; brave warriors slunk from the fiery glance of Weatherford, who sprung beyond the circle, and towered, the giant he was, between them and the captive.

It was only for a second he stood thus motionless, for his

knife flew from his girdle, and his feet kicked the burning brands from the stake. Then the flashing of a bright blade near Matt Dean's hands, quickly followed, and the avenger found himself jerked from the tree.

"So long as Weatherford is near to save, the White Slayer shall not die," cried the chief, turning upon his thunder-stricken people. "Let the Creeks hold their tongues, and question not the Red Thunderbolt of their nation. Some day they will catch the White Slayer when Weatherford is far away. Then they will kill him; but he who strikes him to the death, falls by this knife—this red arm."

The Creeks were startled to hear such words from their sachem's lips, and eye met eye deep buried in the maze of bewilderment.

"He has struck Omatla, Owango, Spotted Bear—our bravest chiefs," cried Little Tomahawk, facing Weatherford, and pointing to the avenger, with quivering finger.

"In the deep morass where the poison spiders weave their webs, our chiefs sleep with his mark upon their heads. In the thicket the ground-bird builds her nest in the skulls of the noblest of our race, who died by the White Slayer's knife. Along the Coosa—beside every stream that waters the lands of the Creeks, he has left his four lines. To-night he entered Weatherford's lodge, to send the great sachem to the wigwam of the Manitou. But Little Tomahawk was on the alert. He struggled with the pale-man—he conquered him. Little Tomahawk dares to question Weatherford. Why does he free one who has killed the noblest of his people—one who struck at his own heart?"

As the speaker finished he folded his arms, and fastened his eyes upon the Red Thunderbolt.

"Why?" cried Weatherford, in a tone which showed his subordinate's words had exasperated him to no little degree. "Why?" he repeated. "Because Weatherford wants to!"

A number of Indians laughed at Little Tomahawk's chagrin, and before the beaten chief recovered his self-possession, he beheld the red ranks part again, and Weatherford leading Matt Dean from the spot.

The chief's hand was closed on the white man's arm, and

in silence they walked from the village, while thousands of exasperated people shot looks of anger at them.

The settler could scarcely credit his present situation--a moment since the flames were burning great blisters on his body, and now he was being conducted from the stake by the greatest enemy of his race.

Once or twice he looked up to question the chief, but he would quickly drop his head without speaking, which action drew a smile from the Indian.

At length the village was left behind, and the twain entered a forest. Weatherford did not pause beneath the great trees and solve the mystery that surrounded him; but kept on through the demi-gloom until they emerged therefrom upon a circular piece of country entirely devoid of timber of any kind. There was a depression in the center of the little tract, which did not embrace over ten acres, and Matt Dean knew that a spring bubbled from the earth at that point, for he had visited this part of the Creek country before.

The vicinity of the spring was marked by great tufts of long grass, that thrives in wet land, and each of these tufts assumed a ghoulish appearance when they first met the white man's eye in the dim starlight. All at once Matt Dean thought he saw a dark figure drop behind one of the tufts; but as Weatherford did not confirm his vision by word or action, he did not particularly remark it.

From the wood the Red Thunderbolt directed his steps toward the spring, which, at last, they stood beside.

"The White Slayer is free!" said the Creek, suddenly, dropping the avenger's arm, and stepping a pace from his side. "Weatherford has saved his life, and he can go in peace."

"Weatherford, I thank you," he said, advancing a pace nearer the Creek, who did not move, "yea, from the bottom of this old heart I thank you. But, this is neither here nor there. I still yearn to know that secret, but not so much of it as I asked you for some time ago. My daughter--my Myra--still lives. She is your Nowedah. Tell me where she is!"

He took a great step forward and clutched Weatherford's

arm as he finished his last sentence, which drew a laugh from the chief's lips.

"Who told the White Slayer that Nowedah is his child?"

"Well, no difference, chief; but I have heard it from lips that never lie. She is your crazy queen, and you *must* tell me where she is."

"Nowedah is not the White Slayer's child," said the chief, with his eyes riveted upon the white, for the purpose of noting the effect of his words.

"Weatherford, you lie!" was the passionate answer that Dean shot at the Creek, and his whole frame shook with indignation. "Beware, chief, how you trifle with me. I know you have just saved my life, but if you play I may kill. So beware, I say. Nowedah is my daughter."

"Nowedah's face is red like the wood roses," replied Weatherford, calm and to all outward appearances collected. "A lie has never passed the Red Thunderbolt's lips, and it shall not pass them now. By the holy eyes of the white man's God—the Indian's Manitou—Weatherford swears that Nowedah is not the White Slayer's child. *Now*, is he satisfied?"

"No!" cried Matt Dean, almost at the top of his voice, and a second later he sprung upward, striking Weatherford a blow with his steely fist, which caused him to reel and make desperate efforts to regain his equilibrium.

The settler's action was quite unexpected on the part of the Creek, for Weatherford's weapons still occupied their wonted place in his girdle, nor were his hands closed in readiness to resist or to attack.

Merciless Matt's fist was not content with one blow, for he delivered another before the chief struck the earth, and then he threw himself upon the prostrate giant.

"Now or never!" muttered the avenger, with determined emphasis, as he drew from Weatherford's bosom the rope of sinews which the Creek always carried with him for the purpose of binding refractory prisoners, and proceeded to bind the hands and feet of the vanquished. "We'll see who's got the upper hand now. I guess that's no prospect of feelin' yer sledge-hammer fist *this* time."

The chief securely bound, the avenger rose to his feet, and

Impatiently awaited the return of consciousness, for his blows had rendered the Creek oblivious to his surroundings.

At length Weatherford's hands opened and closed again, then the great lids unclosed, and the dark eyes stared up at Merciless Matt.

"Weatherford," cried the avenger, dropping beside his enemy, with his knife glistening in his hand, "you've got to empty out your secrets now, or go to the Manitou. While I stood over you, I've been thinking deeply. When you slew those very dear to me, I swore to our God that I would never spare a person who called himself a Creek. Up to this hour I have kept that oath—terribly kept it, as you well know. But, Weatherford, upon one condition I break it—yes, I will meet the doom I told God to give me, should I break that horrid vow. You do not want to die, Weatherford—few people do. You want to lead your red armies against Jackson—you want to avenge Tallushatchee, and I don't blame you for it. We caught you napping then. Now, Weatherford, think before you speak to me again. To know the fate of my daughter, I break my oath of vengeance—I spare what I have never spared—the life of a Creek. Yes, I am willing for God to punish me for breaking the oath recorded in heaven, to hear all about Myra. Weatherford, with my knife ready to cleave your heart, I call upon you to save your own life by telling me where Myra is—dead or alive. Speak! Will you tell me?"

The eyes of the chief underwent a change. The thoughtful look that beamed in them while the avenger spoke, gave place to another of triumph and defiance strangely mingled.

The interrogative was followed by a minute's silence, and then the Creek's lips parted to repeat one word three times: "*Never! never! NEVER!*"

The White Slayer waited until the last accent had died away, and then, without the uttering of a syllable, his keen blade shot above his head. The fire of terrible vengeance and frenzy lit up his dark eyes, and in that moment he seemed to have forgotten that the noble being who lay helpless before him had lately snatched him from a death ~~we~~ shudder to contemplate.

There is no telling how soon the knife would have started on its descent, for it was gripped by a hand trembling with insane passion; but, before it did descend a dark figure sprung from one of the tufts of grass, and a clenched hand knocked the avenger senseless before he was aware of the presence of a new actor.

The knife intended for Weatherford's heart severed the sinews, and he sprang to his feet with a guttural "ugh."

"Weatherford, go before he wakens!" said the chief's preserver, pointing toward Taledaga. "He must be alone when he opens his eyes. Go, I say."

The chief was reluctant to depart; he would know who saved his life; he would not depart without knowing it.

The figure he confronted was tall, gracefully molded, and clad in the garments of a Creek warrior. But his words, couched in pure English, told that beneath his war-paint he wore a white skin.

"Weatherford will not seek Taledaga until he knows to whom he owes a life," said the Creek, approaching his preserver, and scrutinizing the smooth face in the starlight. "Who stands before the Red Thunderbolt?—not a Creek. Weatherford knows this."

"My name is Lenius Marion," said the disguised youth. "You have seen me before, you shall see me again. Now go, and don't forget that henceforth as before this hour you and I are bitter enemies. I saved your life from policy. Go! he moves."

Len Marion refused the hand Weatherford extended with the exclamation: "It struck *her* down!" and a second later, the Creek was hurrying toward the timber.

"I, too, am interested in the Creek's secret," muttered the young man, looking down upon Merciless Matt, still within the realms of insensibility, "and two chances to one if I don't discover it first. But, time will tell—yes, time will make you kneel before me, and crave my forgiveness—ah! you know for what."

Then, for a minute, the young man stooped over the unconscious avenger, and when he left him, something very like a piece of parchment lay upon his breast.

CHAPTER VII.

THE HIDDEN HOME TENANTLESS.

As Nowedah hurried through the gloom with the helpless renegade poised above her head, the roar of the Manitou's Falls grew more distinct, and at length she pierced the sheet of water, and paused on the flat rock.

Rafe Ringbolt's cries for assistance had ended in a hoarse whisper.

He was doomed, and now he tried to learn in what manner he was to die.

He was not left to conjecture long, for Nowedah soon began to ascend the rugged, natural stairway that led to the watery precipice above their heads.

She did not speak while she ascended, and it was not until she stood at the edge of the falls that her lips parted again.

"No, no," she cried, "pale-face hunt Snowflake no more. Pale-face must float over the falls, then down, down to Watchemenetoc, not up, up to Ka Jai Manitou."

"For God's sake, Nowedah, do not slay me thus," cried Ringbolt, horror-stricken at the nature of his doom. "Release me and I will never return; I will never hunt Snowflake again."

"Ha! ha! ha! the white tongue is as forked as the young wild cherry," was the unpitying reply. "He can not deceive Nowedah. If he must talk let him throw his words into yon white water. It may pity him; Nowedah never pities."

"I might have known that," groaned Ringbolt, in the agony of his despair. "My friend, the devil, has deserted me. What! a boat? I am indeed lost."

This last exclamation was drawn from the coward's throat at the sight of a canoe which Nowedah had drawn from the shrubbery that lined the stream.

She then raised him from the ground, upon which she

had placed him to secure the boat, and laid him upon his back in the bottom of the bark.

A fiendish fire flashed from the Indian's eyes as she did this, and a few moments afterward she thrust the canoe to the water's edge.

The rapids were very swift at this point, so near the precipice, and no human hand could baffle them if they chose to carry any weight over the cataract. The precipice itself was comparatively smooth, but the abyss below consisted of hundreds of sharp rocks, that cut the water like keen razors. They extended a goodly way down the rapids, at the foot of the falls. The chances for Rafe Ringbolt's escape were one in a thousand, and when the canoe touched the water he gave up all hopes. He had hopes while on the bank for aid, for the woods teemed with Indians and Jackson's spies, and either might put in an appearance in the nick of time, and deliver him from the power of Nowedah.

"Queen-hunter, go! the water is not cold, but the rocks below cut like the Indian's knife—worse than the panther's teeth."

With the last words lingering on her lips, the Indian woman shoved the canoe from the foam-flecked shore, and the rapids instantly caught it in their merciless grasp.

Then a triumphant laugh which sounded like a fiendish gibe aroused the doomed man, and with great effort he raised his head above the low gunwale.

"Curse you!" he shouted at Nowedah. "Oh, if I ever git out of this I'll take your heart's blood!" and, his strength exhausted, he sunk back into the boat.

A moment later the bark grated against a rock on the verge of the precipice—it drew a shriek from Rafe Ringbolt—a shriek that might have startled fiends—and then the canoe and its living freight was lost to the keen eye of the sole watcher on the shore.

It was a terrible doom, but not wholly undeserved.

"Nowedah wonders who the queen-hunter was," muttered the Indian, as she descended to the foot of the falls. "and why did he seek Snowflake? Ah, he must have been a bad man, for he had the eye of the wolf, and it eats the flesh of pretty squaws. Was he the owner of the name Snowflake

has whispered in her dreams—the name of—” she suddenly paused, for the falling of a deadened limb above her head startled her, and broke the current of her thoughts. “No, he could not have been Pretty Eyes,” she resumed, while standing on the flat rocks below the precipice of white water. “His eyes were as ugly as the mountain toad’s. But Nowedah sees him not,” as her eyes swept the white rapids, at whose edge she stood, “nor do her eyes fall upon the little boat. He sleeps among the cutting rocks, and the fish are preparing for their midnight meal. Ha! ha! ha! Snowflake is Weatherford’s still. But, Nowedah must to her.”

As if seized with a sudden impulse, the red-woman sprung through the lucent water that reflected back the thousand scintillations of the stars, still laughing in triumph over the renegade’s doom.

That laughter was soon transformed into horror and fear.

In her haste to communicate the coward’s doom to the beautiful insane creature whom she called Snowflake, Nowedah soon reached the large apartment. The fire still burned against the wall, and the body of the panther lay where the mad beast had sunk beneath Rafe Ringbolt’s knife. But Snowflake was gone.

For a moment the Indian’s eyes swept the cavern, and then she called:

“Snowflake! Snowflake!”

But no Snowflake answered her, either in voice or person.

“Where’s Snowflake?” cried the now frightened giantess, suddenly snatching a brand from the fire. “She must not leave the cave. No, no, Weatherford would smite Nowedah with his knife were he to find Snowflake gone when he returns. Snowflake! Snowflake, come back! The pale-face is gone now; he is with Watchemenetoc.”

For a moment she lingered, waiting for a reply, but none came, and she dashed into one of the numerous subterranean passages.

From this she soon emerged with a look of disappointment, and darted into another, from which she at length came forth evidently baffled. After a moment’s thought she sprung from

the cavern, and extinguished her light at the foot of the Maniteu's Falls. An ungovernable impulse, mingled with fear, led her on. Snowflake *must* be found before Weatherford returned, or she—Nowedah—become a fugitive from his vengeance.

She made her way along the slippery rocks toward the mouth of the stream, pausing every now and then to listen for expected sounds of human presence, but the roar of the diminutive Niagara drowned all other noises, but on she went to get beyond the deafening cataract, that she might hear without being disturbed.

"Oh, *what* will Weatherford say when he returns?" she cried, her thoughts returning to the fearful channel. "And Nowedah loves his 'crazy queen,' too. He brought her to the cave after—hist!"

She suddenly paused, and crouched at the water's edge.

She was on the bank of the Coosa now, having left the mouth of its noisy tributary far behind her, and the din of the cataract had to a vast measure died away. The sound came from the opposite bank of the river, which at that point was quite narrow and thickly lined with trees.

The stream must be crossed, and the giantess involuntarily shrank from swimming from shore to shore, for the middle current could not be withstood by woman's strength. Once beyond the current, she could easily reach the shore above the point from whence the sounds proceeded.

But, how to escape the current—the terrible underflow—was the perplexing question that bothered Nowedah now.

Nature came to the rescue.

Scarcely twenty rods above the spot where she had crouched, a tree leaned over the water, and its topmost branches, if topmost they can be called when we consider that they kissed the water, hung several yards beyond the middle current. In fact, the tree almost touched the opposite bank. Ah! here was a natural bridge, and when Nowedah found it, a half-audible cry of joy parted her lips, and she was soon among its branches.

"Snowflake is plucking flowers over the river, poor thing," she said, while she was describing the living parabola. "Who is talking to them now, and she will not leave the spot until

Nowedah comes. Yes," she continued, after listening awhile, "she still talks. Talk on, Snowflake, Nowedah will soon carry you back to Weatherford's hidden home."

She was directly over the dangerous current, and moving with caution. Her knife had been transferred from her hand to her pearly teeth, and her fingers tested the strength of the limbs before she touched them.

A minute later, as Nowedah was congratulating herself upon her success, a low growl assailed her ears, and the shaking of the tree-top told her that other beings than herself were above the murky waves of the Coosa. Despite her natural firmness of nerve, the noise shot a momentary chill to Nowedah's heart, and when she parted the thick-leaved branches and peered ahead, the glare of a twain of eyeballs greeted her visionary senses.

There was no shirking the conflict now, for the fiery globes were approaching, and, bracing herself against a limb, the giantess seized her knife.

The terrible current rushed beneath her; the king of the Alabama forests was preparing to attack her; and Weatherford's "crazy queen" was but a short distance away!

These thoughts, added to which was the almost absorbing one that if she vanquished the panther and lost Snowflake, Weatherford would hunt her to the death, transformed Nowedah's nerves into steel, and, in the braggadocio of the Indian, she taunted her enemy with cowardice and dared him to advance.

The panther's eagerness for the conflict soon told the Indian that he did not deserve the epithets she had hurled upon him, for, with a cry that smote the heart of the forest beyond the stream, he sprung forward.

The shades of night were wearing away now and the giants could faintly discern the huge body of her antagonist.

CHAPTER VIII.

LOVER AND FATHER.

To explain Len Marion's appearance near the great Indian village of Taledaga, and the better to follow him from the spot where he felled the White Slayer to preserve Weatherford's life, we must unravel a mystery contained in chapter fourth—the stealing of the Red Robin while Merciless Matt sought the wood spring.

While the avenger followed in the wake of the fleeing Indians, slaying without mercy those who stepped aside to die, he little deemed that the "accursed one," as he had dubbed the young hunter, was not far behind him. Len Marion desired as much as Merciless Matt to wring Weatherford's secret from him. He scarcely believed Myra alive, for he had seen her scalp, and well he knew that the Creeks scalped none save those who were dead. Still, he thought, the Red Thunderbolt knew something concerning the woman he loved, and he would cling to that secret as he clung to life itself. He was aware also that threats against the chief would avail naught, for Weatherford was not afraid to die, and the mystery, if obtained at all, from the Creek's lips, must be the result of strategy. He was not aware that the White Slayer was following the Indians, until he stumbled over a yet warm corpse in the gloomy wood, and felt the four bloody furrows on the brow.

If he would work aright he must work in secret and alone, for Matt Dean would not permit him to tread the trail with him, for he believed the young hunter the black-hearted coward he had been told he was.

Marion managed to keep beyond the avenger's ear-shot, and when he saw the glimmer of fire far ahead he quickened his steps but advanced with extreme caution. The building of a fire in the rear of the Creek army he could not account for, but soon the mystery was explained.

He saw Matt Dean bending over a beautiful Indian girl,

whom he had evidently placed upon a bed of leaves. The pale face of the dying creature he had seen before—he had met her in her father's lodge when Creek and pale-face were at peace, and many serviceable and beautifully ornamented pieces of clothing had he received at her hands. There were times when the young hunter believed he loved the Red Thunderbolt's daughter—this was before he met Myra Dean—and had he never encountered Merciless Matt's child, it is probable he would have been a Creek chieftain ruling a thousand fierce subjects. That the pure minded Red Robin loved him he did not doubt; her eyes, her lips, her heart told him this, and when his visits to the Creek camp ceased—when they parted on the Coosa's shaded bank, he felt that he had broken a woman's heart.

But now Red Robin was dying, and though very near her, he dared not show himself—at least not while Matt Dean watched at her side.

Crouched at the foot of a gnarled oak, the young hunter listened to the major part of the conversation between the Indian girl and the White Slayer. It sent an indescribable thrill to his heart, and when Red Robin vainly tried to disclose the hiding-place of her father's "crazy queen," he could scarcely keep himself behind the tree. He wanted to dash forward and tear the disclosure from the girl, but safety kept him hidden, and had he disobeyed her warning voice, he might have fallen a victim to Dean's hate.

When the avenger bounded into the forest the second time for water, Len Marion resolved to execute a hastily-formed plan.

"My canteen is full of water," he said, "and it will revive the poor girl. By heavens! she shall not breathe the secret to him—no, no, she shall disclose all to me, and if that 'crazy queen' proves Myra, I will rescue her. If she is another, I will see her anyhow. Robin!"

He was at the girl's side now, and she recognized him, but could not speak. In the vain attempts to articulate, she stretched forth her hand, and he grasped it fervently, which drew a grateful smile to the face of the girl.

Suddenly he raised Red Robin from her leafy couch and darted toward the gnarled tree where he had left his rifle

This he seized in his right hand, and with the demi-conscious girl lying across his left arm, he bounded toward the Coosa.

Looking back once he saw a figure between him and the fire, and knew that Merciless Matt had discovered the tearless bed. Presently he paused, and discovered that he was not pursued; the figure at the fire had vanished, and the White Slayer was again on the trail of the beaten red-men.

"Perhaps he deems me a panther," said the young hunter, with a smile, as he seated himself at the root of a great poplar, and turned his attention to the almost corpse that lay like a stricken doe in his arms. "Well, for once I've outwitted the White Slayer, and if this poor creature lives I will get ahead of him again."

While running through the forest he had applied his canteen to the Red Robin's lips, and, while he dared not build a fire which might attract Merciless Matt's attention, his hands told him that the girl's heart still throbbed, the pulse still beat. He knew not the nature of the Indian's wound; he felt that she was near the sable shore, and with the first groan that escaped he bent his face near hers.

"Red Robin—"

"Ah! pale-face," she articulated, with difficulty, notwithstanding the fact that her throat was near clear of blood. "Red Robin knows you—Pretty Eyes."

Thus she had styled him when she sat at his feet before her father's wigwam, and listened enraptured to the romantic stories he loved to breathe into her ears.

"Yes, Robin, 'tis I—your Pretty Eyes. I—"

"No, no, not Robin's Pretty Eyes," said the girl, with a painful sigh. "He belongs to the pale lily. She stole the Pretty Eyes from poor Robin, and caused her heart to bleed like the broken stem of the big-leaved plant. Pretty Eyes—"

Her voice grew faint, and the hunter felt the end at hand. He knew that the girl was sinking into a lethargy, from which she might never be aroused, and he shook her gently as he cried:

"Girl, girl, wake up! Shake off this sleep—this drowsy "ief. Tell me where your father's 'crazy queen' is. She is under something—but under what?"

A moment later he felt a pair of arms encircle his neck, and found himself drawn upon the bosom of the Indian girl. He did not resist: he believed it was her last fond embrace of one whom she had loved through life, and he was surprised to hear the answer to his interrogative breathed into his ear:

"She's down under the Manitou's Falls, Pretty Eyes."

Under the Manitou's Falls!

The words tore Len Marien from Red Robin's embrace, and before he could attempt their analyzation, a yell broke the stillness, and he found himself in the grip of several Indians! But he had no intention of becoming a prisoner, for, displaying all his strength, he hurled his foes from him, seized his rifle and bounded away. With cries of baffled rage the red-skins followed him some distance, but when they lost the sound of his footsteps, the pursuit was relinquished, and the young hunter lessened his speed.

"Under the Manitou's Falls," he repeated, as he hurried through the darksome wood. "What can the girl mean? Was not sanity deserting her throne when she breathed those words into my ears? I have been to those falls, and once I came so near going over them that ever since I've kept at a safe distance. But I'm going there again now, and I will fathom the Red Robin's words. Oh, I hope that my bullet didn't strike that poor girl, for my heart tells me that she is **very dear to it.**

"No, I'm not going to Manitou's Falls," he resumed, after many moments of silence. "There's plenty of time in which to look after the wanderings of a dying brain. I'll keep on Matt Dean's trail. He's going to wring Weatherford's secret from him, and I want to be present when that is done. But I calculate that Matt will find the Creek giant more than a match for him. He's found him so already, and Weatherford's guardian spirits never desert him in the time of need."

The young hunter now threw himself on Merciless Matt's trail, but in the forest through which Weatherford led the avenger after his rescue from the stake, he paused to don the habiliments he had stripped from a dead Creek. Then he hurried forward, and with his characteristic boldness, joined

the rear guard of the Creek forces, and entered Tale-laga. He was soon made aware of the absence of Weatherford, and resolved to tarry awhile, waiting for the chief's return and the results of the avenger's plots.

While he sauntered through the Indian village he caught a glimpse of Merciless Matt on the ragged hilltop, and he was surprised when night came without bringing Weatherford. Now he mentally suggested that the chief had deserted his red forces, and sought his "crazy queen."

"I'll wait for him till midnight, and then if he comes not I'll seek the falls."

Midnight witnessed the capture of Merciless Matt.

Len Marion mingled with the crowd of Indians that bore the avenger to the stake, but he was powerless to aid him. In a moment of bitterness the young man thought that Matt deserved all this, for the scorn with which he had treated him, but when he thought of the old settler's woes, of the schemes of lying villains, he dismissed such thoughts, and wished himself strong enough to snatch him, his enemy, from the stake.

Secure, as he thought, in his disguise, he watched the deviltries of the maddened Indians, and a few moments before the thunderbolt appearance of Weatherford, he felt a hand touch his shoulder.

Turning, he confronted a young Indian, who beckoned him aside, and, filled with wonderment, the young hunter followed.

"Don't you know me?" asked Marion's companion, when they had reached a spot some distance from the stake.

The question was clothed in good English, characteristic of all Creeks, who spoke English at all.

"Know you? no," said Marion, in the Creek tongue, determined not to betray himself.

"Many moons ago, when Creek and pale-face shook hands over the buried hatchet, Pretty Eyes snatched a young Creek from the Coosa. Has Pretty Eyes forgotten that?"

"No," said the hunter, recalling his act of heroism. "Are you Neowathla?"

"I am he."

"Then I have a friend among so many red enemies," cried

Marion, taking the warrior's hand and raising it from his side.

"Yes, yes, Neowathla is Pretty Eyes' friend," was the response; "but he must fly."

"Fly!" cried Marion. "I want to snatch my friend from the fire. Neowathla will help me."

"No, no, he must burn! He slew Neowathla's brother, therefore he owes him nothing. But he owes Pretty Eyes all. Pretty Eyes, fly! Already Sleeping Turtle, and Gray Hawk, look upon you with curious eyes, and their mouths have kissed their warrior's ears."

The brave squeezed Marion's hand as he uttered his Indian name, and gently pushed him forward.

"I will go, Creek," he said, with reluctance; "but tell me one thing. Does a cave exist under Manitou Falls?"

This question was born on the spur of the moment, and put a moment later.

"Yes," said the brave, quickly; "but go, Pretty Eyes, go!"

While yet the command lingered on the young chief's lips, the twain separated, and Marion hurried toward the Coosa, leaving, as he hated to do, Merciless Matt to his fate. It is doubtful whether the avenger would have accepted freedom at the hands of the man who he believed deserted his family in their time of direst need.

If Indians suspected him, it would prove death to remain in the village, and he thanked God that Neowathla was grateful enough to return with kindness the benefit he had conferred months before.

The young hunter reached the vicinity of the spring, and had stooped to drink, when something singular claimed his attention. The fiendish yells in Taledaga had ceased with an abruptness which he could not explain, and directly afterward the indistinct tones of a single speaker fell gently, like zephyrs, upon his ears.

He rose erect and listened, and a moment later the single voice ceased, too.

Then the stars showed him two figures coming directly toward him, and he concealed himself in one of the tufts of grass.

From his concealment he witnessed the stormy interview between Merciless Matt and his rescuer, the red man of mystery, whose life, so the reader has seen, he saved.

"I'll tell him who saved Weatherford," murmured the young man, when the chief had departed. "He can not hate me worse than he does, if I tell him."

So saying, he drew a bit of heavy paper from his bosom, and, upon his knee, rudely traced thereon with a piece of kiel, these words:

"MATT DEAN—You were rash. Kill Weatherford, and you will never, never discover his secret. I, a stripling, am not so rash as you, with all your experience. Pardon me, then, for saving Weatherford. LEN MARION."

But would Merciless Matt pardon him? The young hunter knew he would not. He almost believed that when the avenger read the words he had placed on his bosom, he would vow to hunt him down, for the blow he had given him.

"Let him hunt me," said the young man. "It takes Matt Dean a long time to get over a whirlwind of wrath, and I must keep out of his clutches till he calms down. Now for Manitou's Falls!"

With a parting look at the avenger, the young hunter walked away toward the meandering Coosa.

He traveled quite leisurely till dawn, when he reached a spot to which was indistinctly borne the sound of the sought-for cataract. The place where he halted was a secluded spot on the banks of a narrow stream, whose fountain-head was far within the recesses of the wood, and which debouched into the Coosa a short distance below the falls. Here a clump of shady young poplars grew, and several which had fallen rendered the center of the patch almost impenetrable to the naked eye, even when the possessor was quite near.

"An hour for rest and breakfast," murmured Len Marion, as he drew a piece of pemmican from his pouch, "and then for the meeting with Weatherford's 'crazy queen.' I'll enter that cave down under the falls, though a thousand Creeks guard its threshold, for something tells me that she who dwells there is—"

He paused abruptly, for the breaking of a twig assailed his ear; it was instantly followed by the parting of the poplars,

in his rear, and grasping his rifle he shot to his feet, and wheeled to confront his foe.

And that foe!

Scarcely ten feet from the young hunter stood Merciless Matt, with flashing eyes and deadly rifle directed at the stripling's head.

"Curse you, coward!" he hissed. "I waked up sooner nor you expected. If you've any prayers, say 'em, fur by heaven you're goin' to die. You'll never save another Injun's life—never!"

CHAPTER IX.

BEFORE THE AVENGER'S RIFLE.

"NEVER!"

The word was clothed in the bitterness of eternal hatred, and the White Slayer pressed his cheek against the rifle-stock as it shot from his lips.

An uncontrollable storm of passion shook his frame, and Lenius Marion saw that it was the madman's intention to shoot him down over his frugal repast.

"Matt Dean, hold a minute," he said, putting forth his hand as though he would turn the glistening rifle-barrel aside. "Turn your rifle from me until the gust of madness leaves you, and then you will think and act differently—yes, you will bless me for saving Weatherford's life."

"Bless you, Len Marion!" cried the avenger, before the young man could proceed. "You, who basely deserted my family when the Indians' tomahawks encircled them like a wall of death! Coward! I ought to have shot you long ago for that. But now, piercing my heart with another arrow, you step in and save the life of the scarlet hellion who is the prime inciter of this red war."

"Do calm yourself, Matt Dean," said the young man, trying to be calm under the terrible circumstances. "Think! Weatherford would have died before surrendering you the secret he keeps so inviolable. I saved him for your sake—

for the sake of that secret, not for his own. Why should I respect the latter—why should I spare the murderer's existence?"

"Because he may have favored you sometimes. Weatherford has fits of kindness now and then."

"He never did me a kindness. On the contrary, he has butchered those dear to me. This scar," and the hunter touched a red round mark above his left eye—"this mark—"

"To hell with your mark!" interrupted the mad settler. "I know you'd say that you received it while defending my family. I don't want to hear that tale again. It won't go down, even when greased with slick words. Men saw you sneak among the barrack rubbish, that fatal day."

"Men!" sneered the youth. "Oh, were the liars here now, I'd make them eat their words."

"Even as the wolves are going to eat you, eh?" said Matt Dean, with something like a triumphant smile. "But have you any thing more to say before you go? No prayers, eh?"

A moment's silence followed this, and then the hunter spoke.

"Matt Dean, I could tell you something about Weatherford's secret—something—"

"Then the red devil told you something while you two stood over me last night?" cried the avenger, a new light, now untainted with curiosity, springing into his eyes.

"He told me nothing," was the reply. "Weatherford guards his secret well."

"Then you don't know any thing about his secret," said Matt. "You're only trying to gain time for some purpose. Well, I'll allow that life is precious, especially to young chaps—cowards, like Len Marion. Boy, you can't come that old dodge on me. I'm too old a fox. Pray, I say!"

Again the rifle, which had moved from the line during the above conversation, returned to its deadly position, and the avenger's flashing eyes darted along the barrel.

"Pray!"

"Shoot if you want to, Matt Dean" said Marion, looking calmly into the bore. "I do not cringe at your feet for mercy. I'm not one of the cringing kind. Shoot me, I say,

if you wish to stain your unforgiving heart with a cold-blooded murder, and I'm sure I'll never tell you where Myra is! Shoot, I say! Then go and tell Weatherford's crazy queen that you slew the only true lover she ever had."

The coral lips closed firmly over the last words, and Lew Marion awaited the pressing of the trigger.

But, instead of touching it, the White Slayer's finger flew from it, and the rifle was no longer directed at the hunter's head. Still the fiery gust of passion remained in Matt Dean's breast, but other desires now ruled it to no little degree.

His look and manner declared that he was convinced that the hunter knew something regarding Weatherford's secret, and that something he must know.

A moment later, therefore, he had darted forward, and clutched Len Marion's knife-arm.

"What do you know about Weatherford's crazy queen?"

"Not much, but something very important."

"Who told you?"

"The Red Robin."

"Liar!" shrieked the avenger, at the top of his voice, almost crushing the hunter's womanish arm in his vice-like grip. "I say you lie, Len Marion. The Red Robin died in the panther's jaws night before last. Beware how you trifle with me!"

"That panther was myself, Matt Dean," was the quick reply.

"Curse you!"

"I bore her far away from you. I revived her as I ran, and she told me where her father's crazy queen was hidden."

"Where is she? Where? Tell me!" and the avenger's eyes came very near the hunter's face.

"On one condition, Matt Dean—and on no other."

"Well, what is it?"

"That you release me and permit me to assist you in unraveling the mystery that seems to surround Myra."

"Is that all?"

The words were accompanied by a bitter sneer, which must have cut the youth to the vitals.

"That you withhold the words which men have breathed into your ears regarding my conduct at Fort Mimms, until I shall have proved myself guilty or innocent," the youth added.

"Upon those conditions, you will tell me where Red Thunderbolt's crazy woman is?"

"Yes."

"It's hard to take *you* into my confidence," said the avenger, fixing his eyes upon the youth, "after what has happened, and been said by men whom I have never known to lie in all my dealings with them. Yes, it's hard to do it, for whenever I look at you, I will see you flying to the rubbish of Fort Mimms, leaving my family to perish unprotected."

"How deeply lies can burrow in the human heart," mused Marion, inaudibly; "but I'll tear them all out some day." Then aloud: "You needn't look at me often, then, and I promise to keep out of your sight as much as possible. Do you accept my conditions?"

"I do; now where is the crazy girl? Red Robin was telling me when you snatched her away. But the girl—the girl—where is she?"

"Under the Manitou's Falls."

"I might have thought of that," said Dean. "That dying girl said 'under the—,' but never got any further. Come, let us seek the place at once. By heaven! the crazy queen may not be Myra, after all. But should we find *her* crazy, it would do you no good."

The avenger gave young Marion a strange look, and a few minutes later they had left the poplar thicket.

Not a word was spoken as they hurried toward the Manitou Falls, and Matt Dean kept his face averted from the youth who ran at his side.

With each flitting moment the noise of the cataract grew more distinct, and at last they saw, far ahead the shimmering surface of the river. Though it was dawn, the light ill penetrated the thickly leaved forest, but objects of unnatural whiteness could be perceived at a goodly distance.

Suddenly, as the twain gained the top of a knoll, a piercing shriek reëchoed through the wood, and they stared aghast into each other's faces.

The cry was not repeated. It needed no repetition to tell the two auditors that it emanated from a woman's throat, and, clutching the White Slayer's arm, Len Marion pointed toward the falls.

"That was the crazy queen's shriek!" he cried. "Why stand we here, Matt Dean? She may be in danger, and only to think that she may be your child."

Then they darted toward the cataract, listening the while for a repetition of the startling cry.

Almost imperceptibly their course led to the bank of the Coosa opposite the mouth of Cataract Creek, and down it they hurried with increased speed.

All at once Len Marion's quick eye caught something which the White Slayer failed to perceive, and the touch of his hand brought the avenger to a halt.

A short distance ahead a living tree lay in the river, and among its branches writhed a living object. For a moment the twain gazed upon it, and then the young hunter spoke:

"That panther has been lately stricken, and has floated down the stream. See, broken boughs are still coming down and lodging against him. The person who vanquished him is not far from here! Let us advance, but cautiously, Matt."

And they did advance cautiously, through the almost deathly silence, and among the trees.

"I'd like to know who made that cry," said Merciless Matt, in a low tone. "I half believe now that it was that panther."

"No, no, it was a woman's voice," said Marion. "We'll discover presently — Matt!"

The avenger had sprung behind a tree, and brought his gun to his shoulder.

A glance in the direction the deadly weapon indicated, told Len Marion at what the avenger aimed.

Upon the earth, about fifty feet ahead, lay the head of an Indian. The face was turned from them, and but three feathers, and they broken ones, remained in the head dress. The body was hid from view by a hollow, nor was the entire cranium visible.

The young hunter's first action was to cover the avenger's flint with his hand.

"Don't shoot, Matt," he said, rather impatiently. "That red-skin may not be alone, or may be as dead as a herring. Who knows but that a shot might cost us our lives?"

The gun was lowered before the young man had finished, and a look thanked him for his counsel. That look went to Len Marion's susceptible heart, for it was the only kind one he had received from Matt Dean since that bloody day at Fort Mimms.

A brief but thorough reconnoissance assured the twain that but a single Indian was in sight, and he the one lying in the hollow. For a long time they believed him dead, so still and silent he lay, and it was not until they were within twenty feet of him that they were assured of the contrary.

Then there was a sudden movement on the part of the Indian, and, as though he had heard their footsteps, he rolled over and turned his face toward them.

"Gods!" broke from Len Marion's lips as he glanced from the "Indian" at the avenger, who was staring at him with surprise and astonishment. "It is Rafe Ringbolt!"

"Yes, it's the coward—the renegade—the hunted dog!"

There was no mistaking the features turned upon the whites, for the skin was as white as the snow, and the gray eyes sunk deep in the head, indicative of Ringbolt. The renegade made a desperate effort to gain his feet, when he saw the disguised whites spring toward him, but after rising on his knees he threw his hands wildly above his head, and then, exhausted with his efforts, sunk back with an audible groan.

"Never mind, Rafe, we ar' friends," called Merciless Matt, to the renegade, and the following minute the twain stood over the lacerated villain.

"What means this, Rafe?" cried Matt Dean, bending over the man, and gazing with unconcealed horror on his condition. "You've had a battle."

"Two ov 'em, Matt, two ov 'em," replied the renegade, whose voice, despite his condition, was quite strong. "In the first place I whipped Weatherford's panther, an' then I cheated them ar' falls out ov a bit o' man-meat."

"What do you mean? we don't comprehend you," said Marion, speaking for the first time.

Slowly the renegade's eyes reverted to the young hunter, and when he recognized him he grit his teeth, and a frown settled on his face. But he did not address any thing to Marion, and immediately turned his eyes upon Merciless Matt again.

"I war prowlin' 'round hyar last night," he said, "an' got into a cave, hereabouts. It proved Weatherford's secret home, an' thar I met the panther. Gods! how we two devils fought, but I war too much for him. I got the best of the spotted devil, but a woman, a regular giantess, pounced upon me, an' the up-shot ov the hull matter was that she put me in a boat an' shoved me over the falls. Then the devil came to my aid, his infern'l hands kept the sharp rocks from tearing my heart out, an' the rapids flung me high an' dry upon this hyar bank. But I guess I'm goin' to cheat 'death yit, Matt, fur the fellar what can go over them ar' falls all right, ar'n't born to die."

"You've had a narrow 'scape, Rafe," said the avenger, "and the water has done your wounds a great deal of good. They've stopped bleeding, and we'll try and fix them up. But who shrieked awhile ago? You must have heard it, and there's a panther kicking in a tree down the river."

"I guess Weatherford's big woman an' the brute hed a scrimmage up-stream," said Ringbolt. "I heard the noise; but I crawled into this hollow to keep out of her sight."

"But that shriek!" cried young Marion. "It came from the throat of a girl."

"Yes, Len," another hateful frown, "it came from Weatherford's crazy queen."

"Ah!" cried Merciless Matt. "Did you see her, Rafe?"

"Yes, Matt, last night her face almost touched mine."

The avenger became terribly excited, and his frame trembled like the ever-motionless aspen, as he clutched the renegade's tattered sleeve, and bent nearer his face.

"You saw her, Rafe?" he cried, "then for God's sake tell me, is she my child--my Myra?"

The answer followed fast upon the old man's words.

"No, Matt Dean, she is not your child," said Rafe Ringbolt, in slow and measured accents. "She's a good-lookin' half-breed, as simple an' crazy as a loon."

A sigh of mingled disappointment and relief welled from the White Slayer's heart.

Len Marion rose to his feet, and looked toward the cataract, as if to say : " I believe that Rafe Ringbolt lies ! "

CHAPTER X.

NOWEDAH AND SNOWFLAKE.

WE left Nowedah, the red giantess, in the leaning tree preparing for the struggle with the spotted terror, which she had encountered, and now we return to her. The bravery of her forefathers dwelt in the Indian woman's heart, and often had she met and vanquished the panther in his native wilds. Now she did not fear the attack, on the contrary she hailed it with joy, deeming nothing worth gaining without much peril. The veins grew to swollen rivulets on her forehead, and the muscle on her brawny arms bare to the shoulders stood out like Promethean bonds. She dropped upon her knees when she saw the beast stoop for his fatal spring, and drove one foot between two limbs to prevent her from falling into the water should she be forced from the tree. This last action steadied her body, and admitted of free use of her hands, in one of which glittered the keen knife.

All at once, but not unexpectedly to the Amazon, the panther left his position, and Nowedah's left hand closed on his mottled throat. But the animal suddenly realized his position, and wrenched himself from the red fingers before Nowedah could use the knife.

Then recovering himself in a second, he flew at his antagonist and buried his teeth in her shoulder. His ponderosity forced the Indian lengthwise upon the tree, and she shrieked with pain at the wrenching of her foot between the limbs. But notwithstanding her disadvantage, she struggled with the beast with the energy of defiance, and managed to drive her knife once beneath the tough hide. But victory seemed disposed to favor the panther, for he had near forced Nowedah

from the tree, and the knife had seemingly inflicted no great injury. Nowedah's foot alone prevented her from falling into the deadly current, and she feared that the tree, which swayed terribly beneath the weight of both, would break and land them in the water.

It was with difficulty that the beast supported himself on the tree, whose body was slippery with his gore, and once or twice he near fell into the river. Nowedah could keep him from inflicting any dreadful injury upon her; but she could not repay him with her knife, while he plunged upon her breast.

Thus, for some minutes, the terrible conflict raged, when, while the spotted demon slipped in his own gore, Nowedah suddenly sprung up and darted upon him. She caught his bloody throat in a vise-like grip, and bore him, spitting and scratching, backward upon the tree. Then her knife flashed aloft, then it descended once, twice, thrice, when she relinquished her hold, and the brute dropped into the swift water.

The Amazon drew a breath of relief, and wrenched her swollen member from its living vise.

"Nowedah too much for panther," she muttered, in a low but strikingly boastful tone. "She too strong; he too weak. But Snowflake! Does she still talk about the flowers?" and she stretched her neck forward and assumed a listening attitude.

"Pretty flowers! Snowflake will make a wreath of your beauties, and crown the nests of the silver wrens. Ho! ho! ho! flowers, were it not for thee, poor Snowflake would droop and die, even as the robin dies when the arrow strikes her mate."

These words indistinctly, it is true, but nevertheless intelligible, came to Nowedah's ears from the opposite bank of the Coosa, and caused a smile of gratification to overspread her face.

Her struggle with the panther had not disturbed Weatherford's crazy queen, who, immersed in conversation with the flowers, was oblivious to all surrounding events.

While Nowedah collected her scattered strength, she wondered how Snowflake had reached the opposite bank. She

did not believe the poor girl possessed of enough sense to avail herself of the leaning tree, and then the panther would have met her there had she tried the natural bridge. She did not think that Snowflake had slipped into the water at the foot of Manitou Fall, and was borne by the rapids into the forest. In this manner had the "crazy queen" reached the opposite shore, and upon the recovery of consciousness—would to God it had been reason!—she sought the objects never absent from her disordered brain—flowers, such as grow only in Alabama's woods and along her romantic streams.

When the Amazon thought herself strong enough to proceed, she crept to the edge of the tree, and quietly dropped into the water.

To gain the bank was but the work of a minute, for she was beyond the rapids' current, and, guided by Snowflake's voice, she plunged into the forest.

Her saturated moccasins deadened her footsteps, and presently she came upon the girl.

Snowflake sat at the foot of an oak, and her lap was literally overwhelmed with flowers. There, in profusion, lay the blossom of the Indian turnip, the snow-leaved flowers that open in the spring and make the ground white till winter's frosts, the wood-lilies, the asphodel, and wild pinks and pinies. She was busily engaged in forming a wreath, talking the while to the natural beauties—talking in a strain that would make the heart of the susceptible beholder weep.

Yes, she was going to crown the nests of the wrens with flowers, for they came to the cave beneath the great waters, and made her heavy heart glad with their chirpings, and some day she would build a flowery ship and float away to the land of good spirits, leaving Weatherford and Nowedah alone.

In this rambling strain she talked, while the triumphant Amazon approached, and all at once the poor flower-girl felt a heavy hand upon her shoulder.

The touch drove a look of terror into Snowflake's eyes, and a perceptible shudder shook her lithe frame. Ere it fled, she was upon her feet, and from her lips there pealed that startling shriek which had surprised Merciless Matt and the young hunter.

"Snowflake must go with Nowedah," said the Indian woman, meeting the crazed girl's gaze with a look of authority. "She should not have left the ground wigwam. Come!"

"No, no, no," said Snowflake, looking sadly down upon her scattered flowers. "Don't take Snowflake from her sisters, Nowedah. They will die without her."

"There are flowers in the dark wigwam."

"But it is so light here. What makes it so beautiful? Where are the lamps that hung in the tree-tops?"

"The Manitou has blown them out," said the giantess, quickly, "and he will steal all the flowers in the cave if Snowflake does not hasten to them."

"No! no! He must not take Snowflake's sisters from her!" cried the girl, starting forward, with frightened countenance. "They must live for Snowflake. She thought the Manitou was good."

Taking advantage of her love for the flowers in the cave, Nowedah hurried the maniac toward the river and presently gained the bank opposite the leaning tree. Then, throwing her arm around the fragile form, she sprung into the water and clutched the lower branches of the tree.

"Now draw yourself up into the tree, Snowflake," said Nowedah. "Quick, quick, or the cave-flowers will go to the Manitou!"

Quickly the girl drew herself into the tree, and Nowedah followed.

The trunk was soon gained, and in time the mad girl found herself once more beyond the watery threshold of her underground home.

The foregoing incidents transpired in less time than we have described them, and while the hunters stood over Rafe Ringbolt, Snowflake and Nowedah were discussing an early repast, and drying their saturated garments before a crackling fire.

All at once the girl dropped the venison she was raising to her lips, sprung to her feet and riveted a frightened stare on Nowedah.

Never before had the Amazon seen such a light in Snowflake's eyes, and she could not repress a cry of astonishment, as she darted from the fire.

"Snowflake ! Snowflake !" she cried, "what see you ?"

"Snowflake ?" cried the girl. "Woman, I am not Snowflake. Tell me, who art thou, and how came I here ? Oh, where have I slept so long ? Woman, I say, tell me all about myself. I can recall but little now, and that little is terribly vague and uncertain. What place is this ? A cave—but where ? Oh, God, do I sleep still ? Is this but some wild creation of an overwrought brain ? Woman—ogress—"

She paused to stare in horror at the picture of affliction before her.

With pale terror and superstition enthroned on her face, Nowedah was shrinking from the girl, trembling like a storm-shaken reed, bent in abject fear.

However untutored she might have been, the Amazon saw that Weatherford's charge was no longer mad.

Like a flash of lightning, reason had returned ; but the poor creature could not comprehend the change.

"Woman," she suddenly resumed, "tell me where I am—why I am here. Oh, I hear the musketry that rung in my ear that fatal day. I see the red-men swarm into the yard ; I hear— Oh, God ! enough of this ; blot it from my memory. I fly this den, since you will not tell me, red ogress. Yes, yes ; I fly to those who loved me once—to father's arms. Back ! keep from me, or God helping me, I'll brain you !"

These last words were uttered as Nowedah, recovering from her fright at seeing Snowflake starting toward the corridor, sprung forward with the intention of arresting her progress. The girl had seized a tomahawk which lay on the rocky floor of the cavern, and her mien declared that she would use it if the Amazon approached too near. She retreated toward the corridor revealed by the firelight, keeping her eye upon the red giantess, who was slowly approaching her.

"Back, woman !" cried the girl again. "I do not want to shed the blood of my own sex ; but— What mean you ?"

Nowedah had caught up the dead panther, which had lain in the cave since Rafe Ringbolt's departure, and was whirling it around her plumed head.

A moment after her exclamation Snowflake comprehended the Indian's intention, and sprung toward the corridor ; but

at that instant the corpse left Nowedah's hand, and the girl went to the floor like a stricken nine-pin.

With a cry of delight, the Amazon shot forward, and in an instant the young girl's limbs were encircled with strong cords.

"Ha! ha! ha! No one can outwit Nowedah," she laughed; "white, spotted or red. What will the Red Thunderbolt say when he comes to his ground-nest and discovers that Snowflake's head is not cracked—that she will babble no more about the ugly flowers? Ugh! Wish Weatherford was here now; but he will not be absent long. He said he would come back before he met the pale-faces at Taledaga, and he will come, Nowedah thinks, before another sleep. Hark! was that the water, or the footstep of one who seeks Snowflake?"

She started to her feet, with the unconscious girl in her arms, and fled from nothing.

"Ah! more than one seek Snowflake," she said, as she darted across the cavern, "but only one shall find her, and he is the Red Thunderbolt. Oh, Great Spirit, that he were here now."

The following moment the cavern was entirely untenanted, for Nowedah had disappeared with her beautiful burden.

CHAPTER XI.

THE RENEGADE TURNS DESERTER.

WHEN Rafe Ringbolt declared that the insane occupant of the cave beneath Manitou Falls was not Myra Dean, but a half-breed girl, the young hunter inwardly charged the renegade with stating what he knew to be a malicious falsehood.

"I know you hate me bitterly, Rafe Ringbolt," he murmured, turning his eyes upon the renegade, whose wounds Merciless Matt was dressing. "I know that you would, if you could, steal up behind me and drive your knife into my back. For it was I who charged you with crime in old For

Mimms, I who hastened your trial, I who procured your disgrace. 'Therefore you have cause to hate me, and I must keep an eye on you. I wouldn't care now if your wounds would kill you ; I wouldn't shed a tear over your grave, and I'm sorry now that I saved your accursed life, a moment since. I wonder that Matt Dean can dress your wounds.'

When he paused he stepped to the avenger's side and witnessed the dressing of the renegade's wounds. They were not so severe as he supposed them to be, no bones were broken, and the flesh lacerated by the claws and teeth of the panther was bound up, and secured by adhesive plasters, a supply of which every southern frontiersman carries for an emergency.

During Len Marion's soliloquy, the renegade and Dean had conversed in low tones, and suddenly, while the young man stood over the former, the avenger looked up into his face.

"Boy," he said, "I guess we know where Myra is now."

Marion started at these words, and there was an expression in Merciless Matt's eye which he could not fail to note.

"Know where Myra is?" he cried, glancing at the renegade. "I am sure I do not. Where is she, Matt?"

"In a cave about fifteen miles down the river."

"Who told you?"

"Ringbolt here."

The young hunter fixed his eyes upon the renegade, who stood his searching look with a calmness that surprised him, and for a moment threw him off his guard.

"You are not lying, Rafe Ringbolt?" he said, half interrogatively, with his eyes still fastened upon the disgraced subaltern.

"Lying!" cried Matt Dean, before the renegade could move his tongue. "He knows better than to lie upon such a subject as this. If I catch him in a lie, I'll tear his heart out, and cram it down his infernal throat. He's going to guide us to that cave, and if he proves treacherous he must abide by the consequences. Matt Dean can not be toyed with."

"Lie!" said Rafe Ringbolt, who had waited with manifest impatience for an opportunity to reply to the youth, whom

he regarded with a look of hatred. "Why should a man in my condition lie?" and he glanced at his bandaged arms. "I tell you, Len Marion, I'm going to play fair now, and I would be an ungrateful dog if I did not repay you and Matt for your present kindness. Thank God, there's more humanity in Rafe Ringbolt than people give him credit for. For near a week I have known where Myra is. I have tracked Weatherford to the cave I have mentioned to Matt, and, entering, I have discovered the girl.

"Crazy?"

The youth was beginning to believe the renegade.

"No," answered Ringbolt.

"Thank God!"

"Yes, you may well thank him that she is not the creature you have suspected her of being—that girl under Manitou Falls, for to her, sense will never come again. She's the craziest thing on earth. Matt," and here his gaze fell upon the avenger, "I guess I'm strong enough to walk those fifteen miles, but if we could find a boat, we'd get there an infernal sight quicker."

"There should be boats hereabouts," said the avenger, his eye glancing to the river. "Where's the one you went over the falls in?"

"Knocked to fragments by the rocks, I guess."

"Was it a Creek boat?"

"Yes, a reg'lar built Creek."

"Then it's safe, for these rocks can't hurt a Creek boat. That tribe can build boats that can't be harmed by any the cataracts in the world. They'd think it sport to go over them big falls in York State."

Leaving the renegade in the hollow, Matt Dean and the young hunter went down-stream in search of the Creek canoe, and found it lodged in the same treetop which had caught the body of the panther slain by Nowedah.

The discovery of the canoe was hailed with exclamations of joy, and the twain turned toward the renegade, who had watched their movements with a fiendish play of countenance.

"Matt," whispered Marion, "I don't like Rafe's story, since I've been thinking over it. He's one of the meanest devils

on earth, and the man who would attempt the deed he did in the fort would do any thing. I am still in favor of searching the cave under Manitou Falls, regardless of that devil's asseverations."

Merciless Matt turned to the speaker with an indignant expression.

"That jest sounds like you," he said. "It looks now as if you are afraid to meet Myra. If you are, go an' search Manitou cave; if not, be a man and go with me. Rafe knows that I—and you too, for that matter—am not to be trifled with; he knows that if we catch him in a lie, we'll kill him, and when death leers into a fellar's face he's going to stick to the truth like a wood tick. You can take your choice, Len Marion—act either the dog or the man. I'm not going to coax you, for you know how we stand regarding a certain thing. *I'm* going with Ringbolt—going fifteen miles down the river, an' if he don't show me Myra I'm going to put a bullet in his brain. That's my ticket; do as you please."

"I'm going with you."

"That's manly—I think a leetle more of you now than I did a minute ago."

"But we must watch that white-faced devil," admonished the young hunter, "and believing that he means to betray us, I shall act accordingly."

They were too near the renegade to carry on further conversation, and in almost less time than it takes us to record it, they had launched the canoe below the drift, and were flying down the Coosa.

The oars were handled by Matt Dean and Marion, and the renegade reclined in the bottom of the boat, his face turned toward the stripling. Now and then he would raise his eyes over the gunwale, note his surroundings, then resume his old and easy position again.

Matt Dean's heart throbbed with joy as the large but light boat swept down the narrow stream.

At last he was to become possessed of Weatherford's secret, and that without risking his life in obtaining it. The fact of his daughter's existence and her hiding-place was the secret the Red Thunderbolt guarded so well, and would sooner

surrender his life than it. But in what situation would he find his daughter? This interrogative troubled the avenger, and more than once, certain mental answers nearly caused the oars to drop from his hands. Ah! he feared he would find her the wife of the great Creek sachem, and that she would bear a child to him who led the wild red mob that made him wifeless and almost childless that terrible thirtieth of August. Such thoughts were enough to wring the stoutest father's breast, and Matt Dean vowed that, were his fears confirmed, his rifle would make his daughter a widow, and her offspring fatherless.

During the voyage, Len Marion never removed his eyes from Rafe Ringbolt, and the renegade could not but believe that he was a suspected man—that his heart was being read by his youthful rival.

More than once his eyes sunk abashed beneath Marion's steady gaze, and he gave a sigh of relief when he commanded the avenger to guide the boat to the shore. At this point the stream was lined with rocky banks, whose greatest altitude could not have exceeded seventy feet. Their sides, instead of being perpendicular, formed a rather steep inclined plane, but were covered with broken rocks as though a thousand Cyclops had wielded their giant hammers there. The rocks stretched to the water's edge, allowing no grass to be nourished by the waves, and among the barrenness our two friends could not discern the slightest indication of a cave.

"I can't see any cave here, Rafe," said Dean, turning upon the renegade, as the boat struck the rocks at the foot of the banks, "and it looks like dirty work on your part. Beware! I tell you. A sign of treachery, and—death."

"I know that, Matt," said the villain, with a smile, "an' ef I don't play fair, give me a bit o' lead. But there's a cave here, an' we'll be into it presently. So git out o' the boat."

The trio soon found themselves on the rocks, and, at Ringbolt's suggestion, Matt Dean drew the canoe from the waters and placed it behind some large rocks that it might not be observed by any persons coming down the stream, during their absence.

Then the renegade walked a short distance up the bank, and removed a flat stone of large dimensions that leaned against the acclivity.

This action drew an exclamation from his companions' lips, for it disclosed a hole large enough to admit a man in a stooping posture.

"Thar ! d'ye think I've lied ?" cried the renegade, in a triumphant tone, turning suddenly upon the twain. "Beyond this hole is the child you seek, Matt Dean, I swear by the God who made such a devil as I. I'll go ahead, an' you kin foller in any order you like. Weatherford is away now, and before he returns you kin be far away with the gal."

"Go ahead and don't talk so much," cried Dean, impatiently. "I'm a father, Rafe Ringbolt. You are not."

"True," said the renegade, as he crouched and crept into the opening which looked as ominous as the portals of doom to Len Marion.

"Watch him !" he whispered to Merciless Matt, "now, more than ever, do I suspect him. I would almost swear that he intends to betray us."

In the gloom they were now penetrating Matt Dean could not see the renegade, who was just ahead ; but he could hear him crawling over the smooth natural floor. Ringbolt was possessed of no weapons to indicate his progress, as the rifles of our friends indicated theirs, by striking the sides of the corridor every now and then, and it was with no little difficulty that he could hear the renegade.

At length Merciless Matt found himself in an apartment whose ceiling and walls he could not touch, even when he stood erect. They had left the corridor, and were doubtless in a large cavern.

He gently spoke the renegade's name, and received a reply.

"Crawl straight ahead, Dean," said the voice, "I am waiting for you. We are near the girl."

Thus bidden and encouraged, the twain crept on, and presently struck a mass of solid rock !

"Betrayed !" hissed Len Marion, springing to his feet. "I told you so, Matt Dean. I told you so."

"Don't be in such a hurry to condemn," said the avenger, whose tone declared that he feared the worst. "We may have crawled in a circle in this infernal gloom—Ringbolt!"

"Here!" came the renegade's tones from a short distance to their left. "You have crawled in a circle. Now come directly toward me. I'll talk till you reach me."

Reassured to a great measure, the twain turned toward the voice, which by continuous sound kept them in the right path.

"Now here you are," said Ringbolt, and he seemed within arm's length so distinctly his voice sounded. "Ha! ha! ha!"

The next moment the hunters brought up up against a stone wall, and no Ringbolt was within their reach!

"I see all now, however dark it be here!" grated Len Marion. "Until this moment I had forgotten that devil was a ventriloquist. We are betrayed and lay at the feet of his mercy. Oh, curse you, Rafe Ringbolt. If you were here there'd be a soulless breast."

"No doubt of it," came the renegade's true voice, from a spot almost directly in their rear. "But I'm not goin' to oblige you, Lenny. Well, I have betrayed you, if you must know it. With such a prize as Myra Dean to strive for, I'd be an infernal fool if I didn't. You kin make up your minds to stay here till the day of general reckoning. This is my cave not Weatherford's, an' I cheerfully give it up to you. Len Marion, you did me great harm at Fort Mimms, and I brought you here to die of starvation. Matt Dean, you presided at my trial, an' passed judgment upon me, an' I brought you here to die in agony. Some day I'll bring your child here an' show her a heap of bones. Now good-by, my caged eagles. My larder's empty, but there's some old bones scattered about the cave. Mebbe you kin suck some bitterness out o' them."

Then dead silence reigned throughout the cave.

The renegade's words had held the twain spellbound during their utterance, and a minute after he had finished the silliness was broken by a groan from Matt Dean.

"Buried alive!"

"But with plenty of breathing room," said the young

hunter, in a tone that approached gayety. "I'm not going to say die, Matt Dean. Let us act! Think: you have a daughter to tear from the power of fiends, and wife and children to avenge. I have a character which is as dear to me as life to vindicate, and a burning desire for vengeance. Up! Matt Dean, up! Show yourself a man."

The hunter's words electrified the avenger. He started to his feet and felt about in the darkness until he grasped the youth's hands.

"Boy, I thank you for your words," he cried. "They have made me as strong as Samson, and Gaza's gates would feel feathers in my arms. I don't hate you so much as I did, Len Marion, and I pray God that you may vindicate your character. Strike a light."

Brief groping in the gloom that seemed palpable discovered a quantity of dry bark, which Marion's flints soon converted into a bright blaze, that illumined the cavernous prison.

But one corridor led into it, and with a torch in his hand Matt Dean threw himself forward.

The stripling followed him.

It was the passage which they had lately traversed, and boasted of many angles, depressions, elevations and niches.

But no corridors led from it, and as the twain found nothing to obstruct their progress they began to think that they were not prisoners after all.

"We'll reach the river presently," said the avenger, in a congratulatory tone, "and then—"

He paused very abruptly, for a tremendous rock filled the corridor directly before him.

A moment later he placed the torch in Marion's hands and essayed to move the Tarpeian boulder.

"It's no use, boy," he said, desisting, and wiping the great sweat-drops from his brow. "A hundred men couldn't move that rock. Let us go back and pick them bones, for I'm as hungry as a wolf. Rafe Ringbolt and death have euchered us."

"No bone picking so long as I have a bit of pemmican," said Marion. "We're in a bad fix; but do you think we're to die *here*?"

"Yes," with a despairing glance around the cavern;
"don't you?"

"No!"

CHAPTER XII.

DOOMING THE CRAZY QUEEN.

AT this period in our romance, a retrograde movement is necessary to acquaint the reader with the acts of certain characters who, for some time, have absented themselves from the programme, that they might play the deeper unmolested.

Weatherford's unexpected as well as unexampled act, the rescue of Merciless Matt from the flames, as stated in a foregoing chapter, exasperated a great majority of the assembled braves, and more than one knife was half-unsheathed while the sachem moved through the vast crowd toward the forest. The Indians could not fathom Weatherford's purpose, though they knew that he often did singular deeds without questioning any one. But this action crowned the shock, and many a grated anathema reached the chief's ears. That their chief should snatch from their just vengeance one who had never spared the life of a Creek—who struck youth as deeply and mercilessly as age! They could not credit their senses until he had passed beyond sight in the dark tarn, and then the infuriated masses turned mechanically to Little Tomahawk, mutely imploring a solution of the mystery.

Little Tomahawk swayed to and fro with the vehemence of his anger, and he never moved his eyes from the Red Thunderbolt until he disappeared in the woods.

Then he turned to Sleeping Turtle, a giant Creek who stood at his side, and touched his bare arm.

"To Little Tomahawk's lodge," he whispered, elevating his hand over the multitude, and indicating the situation of his wigwam.

The warrior bowed, and with a parting look that spoke volumes, turned on his heel and strode from the crowd.

Two other chiefs—Black Heron and White Crow—received the same summons, and, leaving the crowd perplexed with

his actions, Little Tomahawk followed the last-named chief.

Muttered words, as bitter as gall, welled to the red-skins' lips, while their eyes were turned to the forest; but not one dared speak out boldly against Weatherford. They had hoped to find a revolutionary leader in Little Tomahawk, who boasted of no little ambition, but he was content to keep his lips together, and seek his lodge.

When the chief reached his wigwam he found the three chiefs occupying the bear-skin mats, and awaiting his arrival with feverish impatience.

To the credit of the quartette now assembled, be it recorded that they had the good of the nation uppermost in their minds. They revered Weatherford, believed that he alone could lead them to victory; that without him their people would be annihilated by the white avengers of Fort Minims and other infamous butcheries. But while they thought all this, it was resolved to give the Red Thunderbolt a thrust, in order to bring his mind back to the welfare of the nation.

This thrust was nothing less than the removal of the tenant of the Manitou Cave, or, as they called her, the "crazy queen."

She had drawn Weatherford's mind from the vital interests of the Indians, and when he should have been engrossed in them, he was at her side. Who she really was they knew not, nor did they seek to know.

The circumstances that surrounded the case were enough to cause her removal, and when that had been accomplished the bewitched chief would return to his people. *Then* he would reorganize his beaten warriors for the inevitable conflict, there being no magnet to draw him from duty.

The existence of Snowflake was no newly-acquired secret to the four chiefs, each of whom, upon different occasions, had trailed Weatherford to Manitou, and Little Tomahawk had entered and beheld the girl. Then the chief adhered to his duty—then the spell had not overcome him, but now, what **a mighty change!**

"Under no circumstances must a hair of Weatherford's scalp-lock be harmed," said Little Tomahawk, the chief speaker in the conspirators' council. "But the girl with the

cracked head must step upon the trail that terminates in the Manitou's lodge. Unless we slay her soon, the Gray Whirlwind will fall upon Taledaga, and there will be no Red Thunderbolt to lead us against him. He will be playing with the poor child's hair while our squaws and papposes fall before the pale-faces. He will seek her before another sleep, and so must we."

These words met a decided approval from Little Tomahawk's auditors, and long before the council dissolved, the doom of the "crazy queen" was pronounced.

The chiefs could divine no other method whereby Weatherford could be brought back, as they termed it, to his people.

The gray streaks of dawn were illumining Taledaga when the quartette parted before Little Tomahawk's wigwam.

Half an hour later they came together again in the forest already described, and pushed forward toward the falls, keeping on the alert for Weatherford, whom they feared was also hastening toward Manitou Cave.

They reached the falls while the god of day still slept behind the eastern horizon, and then began that wily reconnoitering for which the American Indian is famous. For an hour they waited for Weatherford, but he came not, and then the impatience of Little Tomahawk's followers inaugurated an advance.

The quartette descended from the several trees in which they had concealed themselves, and clambered down the rocky stairway that terminated at the bottom of the cataract. They believed now that the Red Thunderbolt still remained in Taledaga, and that he would not reach the cave until they had accomplished their fiendish work. In safety the gloom beyond the huge sheet of water was gained, and after an interchange of congratulations, they found the corridor, and crept forward with drawn knives.

Little Tomahawk was in the advance, and well he knew that the possession of Snowflake would cost them a struggle, and perhaps a life besides hers. They knew that Nowedah guarded the "crazy queen," and while she yet lived in Taledaga they had seen her courage tested.

The foremost chief planned many a strategical movement

on the giantess as they approached the end of the dark aisle, and when that was gained, his eyes beheld Nowedah wringing her long raven tresses before the blaze that illuminated the large apartment which boasted no other tenant than she.

The White Crow, who bore a bow and several arrows, proposed to dispatch the giantess with one of the shafts, but the others would not entertain such a proposition for a single moment.

"From this hole in the ground many dark ways may lead," said Little Tomahawk ; "and without Nowedah to tell us where the white-face is, we might hunt for her until our scalp-locks are as white as the snow that sleeps through all the seasons on the lodges of the Androscoggins. We will boldly approach Nowedah, and profess friendship. She knows us, and she will not strike until we have exchanged talk."

As he finished, the chief rose to his feet, and a moment later the moccasined feet were gliding noiselessly over the stony floor toward the unsuspecting giantess, whose face was partially averted.

All at once Little Tomahawk spoke her name.

The effect was electrical. The raven hair fell from her grasp, and she started to her feet as if stung by a viper. And when her gaze fell upon the four red figures before her, she started back and laid her hands upon a rifle that rested against the wall of the cave.

"Peace, Nowedah, we journey from Weatherford," said Little Tomahawk, dropping his weapon, and throwing his empty hands aloft.

The woman glared at them as if to say that the chief spoke falsely, and the click-click of her rifle-lock fell distinctly upon their ears.

"Where's the Red Thunderbolt?" she asked at length, centering her steady gaze upon Little Tomahawk.

"In Taledaga, wounded by the White Slayer's ball."

The Amazon started at these words.

"Then why came ye hither?"

"To tell Nowedah of Weatherford, and fulfill his words."

"Does it take four to tell a story?"

Her eyes wandered to the other chiefs, who stood ready to affirm whatever their leader might say.

"Little Tomahawk tells the story and delivers the message," he quickly returned, not at all nonplussed by the Amazon; "but Weatherford sent his brothers to assist in obeying his commands."

"And what does Weatherford command?"

"He says: 'I will no longer keep Nowedah and the white dove in the Manitou's Cave, for I must be near my people now, and they—Nowedah and the dove—must be near me.' Then he commanded us to bring you through the great wood to Talecaga where Nowedah and the white dove must dress the Red Thunderbolt's wound. Now where is the white dove?"

For a full minute the Amazon did not reply.

She turned upon the quartette like some great barbarian queen, and her keen eyes seemed to pierce the inmost depths of their hearts and read the deception enshrined therein.

Little Tomahawk stood that searching look with the fortitude that characterized him, and was the first to break the silence:

"Nowedah, where is the girl?"

"Where Nowedah left her," was the reply, uttered in a defiant tone, which caused the chiefs to exchange rapid glances.

"The big woman talks in strange words," said Little Tomahawk. "Will she not show us where White Dove is?"

"No!" rung out in thrilling tones, and the rifle shot to her shoulder. "Weatherford sends no one to the cave," she continued, quickly. "He is not wounded: the White Slayer can not mold the ball that touches the Red Thunderbolt. The tongues of Little Tomahawk and his friends are oily and forked. They seek the White Dove for a bad purpose. Weatherford must have crossed their path. But now they must tarry till the great chief comes; they must crouch beneath Nowedah's rifle. Down, red dogs, down!"

The insane fury that flashed from Nowedah's eyes forced the conspirators upon their knees, and at her command they hurled their weapons across the cave.

The Amazon rejoiced in her success, and, while the trio gnashed their teeth in bitterness before her rifle, she listened intently for Weatherford's footfall.

Two hours passed over the head of the Amazon and her enemies—two hours of silence ; but they brought not Weatherford to the rescue.

“ See ! he comes not,” said Little Tomahawk, noting Nowedah’s disappointment. “ He will not leave Taledaga until the Great Medicine heals the White Slayer’s wounds.”

“ Forked tongue, be silent !” cried the giantess. “ Weatherford will come in time.”

“ Ha !” cried Little Tomahawk, throwing a surprised look beyond the Indian woman. “ She comes ! she comes—the White Dove !”

Instinctively, and with a frightened countenance, Nowedah turned her head, when Little Tomahawk shot forward like a great ball driven from a bat. His body struck the woman and hurled her to the floor, where, before she could collect her scattered senses, she found herself being bound by the four chiefs.

Little Tomahawk’s ruse had proved successful, and Nowedah cursed herself in her own fierce dialect for falling so easy a prey to credulity.

After they had bound her the chiefs placed their captive against the wall and plied her with questions regarding Snowflake’s whereabouts. For a long time Nowedah refused to speak, and when she did open her mouth, it was to declare that she did not know where the girl was.

This statement the quartette knew to be deliberate falsehood, and again they returned to threats, but nothing rewarded them.

“ Tear her heart out !” cried the furious Sleeping Turtle, whetting his knife upon the stones.

“ Yes, yes,” chimed in the other subordinate chiefs, glancing at Little Tomahawk. “ She must tell us where the White Dove is or lose her heart.”

Such cries Little Tomahawk could not resist, nor did he wish to resist them, for the determined woman before him had once foiled him in certain designs in Taledaga.

“ Nowedah hears what the chiefs talk,” he said. “ They are mad. Which will she give up—the White Dove or her heart ?”

“ *Her heart !*”

That same moment Sleeping Turtle darted upon the defiant Amazon, and his knife shot into her bosom. When he withdrew it, a second after the blow, it was covered with smoking blood, and Nowedah lay at the foot of the wall as motionless as a statue.

"Now for the 'crazy queen,'" cried the murderer, springing to his feet, and his cry was taken up by his companions.

"Now for the 'crazy queen!' Her blood shall cement Weatherford to his people."

With the aid of firebrands the conspirators discovered the passage into which Nowedah had borne Snowflake, for wet moccasin-tracks glistened on the stones.

A chorus of triumphant shouts greeted this discovery, and a moment later they sprung upon the trail of the beautiful creature whose heart's blood, for the welfare of their nation, they sought.

On, on, still on, in a passage that seemed endless to the conspirators, but at last they *looked down* into a cavern where, in the broad glare of a fire, they beheld the object of their search!

Then they exchanged looks of triumph, for the firelight streamed upon their faces, and White Crow's fingers stole to his bow-string. Without a word the other three drew back, and he with the bow thrust the deadly shaft into the opening.

Another instant and the arrow aim covered Snowflake's heart, but before the red fingers could loose the shaft, a strong hand clutched White Crow's shoulder, and he was hurled backward with a force that bewildered him.

What meant this?

The interrogative was soon answered, for a giant figure towered between the villain and the mouth of the corridor.

The Red Thunderbolt?

No.

It was Rafe Ringbolt, the renegade!

CHAPTER XIII

THE RENEGADE'S WORK.

"It's me—Rafe Ringbolt—ye red devils!" shouted the renegade, as he hurled White Crow from the opening and confronted his astonished companions. "Now, drop your weapons, or by heavens! I'll blow your rascally brains out. Ye weren't looking for me, eh? Guess not, but some people come when they're least expected. I guess ye were looking for Weatherford rather than Ringbolt, and ef it hadn't been for White Slayer ye'd killed the gal afore this."

There was a momentary pause, when the renegade threw his cumbrous pistol to a level with his face, and a deafening report filled the cavern.

The shot was immediately followed by a death-shriek which drew a grin of triumph to Ringbolt's lips.

"There!" he cried, "I told you to drop your weapons, but Sleeping Turtle was determined to disobey, and ye see what he got for it. I'm not to be trifled wth, I tell ye, and—drop that knife, Tomahawk."

Sullenly Little Tomahawk let the knife glide to the ground, and his eyes wandered to the ghastly face of Sleeping Turtle, who had shrunk from the firelight for the purpose of dispatching the renegade with an arrow. But Ringbolt's quick eye had discovered his movements, which had cost him his life.

"Now, Tomahawk, take that cord that hangs at your girdle, and bind yer two brothers. Bind them fast—no she-nanigan—or I'll send a bullet to your brain. Quick about the work, too! for I'm not going to remain here till Weatherford pounces upon us. Then there'll be thunder to pay. What! ain't you going to tie yer red rascals?"

The savages had manifested an untractable disposition, and as the last words left the renegade's lips he stepped forward and thrust the muzzle of the double-barreled pistol against the Indian's head.

"Don't fire!" cried Little Tomahawk, trying to grasp the weapon. "The Creeks shall be bound."

"Then about it!" said Ringbolt, sternly, and stepping a pace back he witnessed the operation he desired.

When Little Tomahawk had bound his brethren to the renegade's satisfaction, he found himself bound in turn by the victor, and lying helpless on the ground.

"Now I'm going to get the gal," said Ringbolt, addressing the chiefs, "and when I am gone, ye may git loose as best ye kin. Doubtless the Red Thunderbolt will cum along and rescue ye. Ha! ha! shouldn't wonder ef he'd knock ye all on the head, and rid the world of three red devils. I never thought to find ye here, or I'd hev brought some gags along. But I guess you'll not holler, as there's no telling who ye might summon to yer sides. So, Tomahawk, the best thing ye kin do is to keep mum, and when I cum back mebbe I'll untie ye, but that's not at all likely."

The renegade again thrust the pistol into his belt and turned to the opening. The fire in the cave below still burned brightly, and Ringbolt was not long in discovering the creature he sought. She crouched against the further wall of the cave, and upturned a fearfully pale face to the mouth of the apartment. Her hands were clasped as if in supplication, and she seemed to be waiting with patience for whatever fate was in store for her.

She did not note the renegade's face when it first appeared in the opening, but when her eyes fell upon it she started to her feet and gazed upon it in terror.

"Girl!" he called to her, "haven't ye a ladder by which a tellar can git down into this hole? It must be thirty feet from here to the bottom of yer room, and the wall is perpendic'lar."

"Had I a ladder, Rafe Ringbolt, I should not be here now," was the reply, in a composed tone.

The renegade started at these words.

"Why this is not the crazy girl," he said, in a voice whose tones fell indistinctly upon the captive's ears. "This girl is sensible, and seems to know me. Girl!"

"What, Rafe Ringbolt?"

"How long have you been here?"

"I don't know. I must have been asleep for a long time."

"Ye've been as crazy as the devil!" muttered the renegade, "and now if I don't work for you, may I go to the spirit land on a hyena! I'm coming down, girl," he called aloud, "and I'll find some way for you to get out."

"You'd better remain where you are, sir."

"Never! How did you git down in this hole?"

"Nowedah dropped me down."

"And how did she expect to git ye out?"

"I don't know."

"May I be cursed if I do!" muttered the renegade, crawling over the edge of the cavern's mouth; "but man nor devil has ever outwitted a Ringbolt yet."

In silence then the maiden watched him drop into the cave, whose stony floor he reached in safety, and turned toward her.

"Well, here I am, girl," he said, with a grin of triumph, "and now the question is, how are we to get away from this place?"

"Ringbolt, that interrogative does not trouble me," she said, in a voice that surprised the arch-plotter. "I know you, sir, and I divine your mission. Possessed of this knowledge, I prefer to remain here."

"Girl, you are as crazy as ever," cried the renegade. "I came hither to rescue you from the power of the red devils I've hunted you a long time, and while others have failed I have succeeded in finding you."

"You speak of others; to whom do you refer?"

"To your father."

"None other?"

"No."

A sigh welled from the girl's heart, and Ringbolt noticed it with a flash of his dark eyes.

"Rafe Ringbolt," she said, a moment later, "you would have me believe that you are in league with my father."

"I am."

"By that sentence I brand you a liar!" was the unexpected rejoinder. "Sir, my father would never league with the villain over whose trial he presided—the scoundrel whom he

sentenced to an existence he richly merited. He might associate with Indians, river thieves, and the beasts of the forests ; but with you, cowardly ingrate, never !”

Her bitter words caused the knife to flash from Ringbolt's belt, and he stepped impulsively forward, with the light of murder in his eyes.

“ Girl,” and he paused directly before the white captive, “ nobody ever bestowed such language upon Rafe Ringbolt and then lived to boast of it. Gods ! I've a mind to cut your tongue out, though such action would give me a songless bride.”

“ Ha ! ha !” laughed the girl at this, “ murder will out, Rafe Ringbolt. You have given the lie to your own words. Your bride ? Never !”

“ We'll see about this,” was the determined rejoinder, “ and the sooner we put an end to this confab the better.”

In the moment of silence which followed the pause, the twain looked into each other's faces.

Then Ringbolt thrust forth his hand and clutched the maiden's slender arm, but a second later she tore it from his grip, and snatched a brand from the fire.

“ Back, coward !” she cried with terrible determination, sweeping the flaming weapon so near his cheeks that great blisters stood out thereon. “ He who would lift his hand against a woman is the veriest ingrate on earth. I will defend myself to the death. Here I will die rather than go hence with you. In his own good time God will direct father's footsteps here if He ordains it ; otherwise then let me become the bride of Weatherford, but never yours ! Never !”

The fiery stick forced the renegade from the spot, and the determined girl followed him. He put his great arms before his face, but the heat and biting flames penetrated his illy-healed wounds, and drew many a cry of pain from his soul.

For a minute he gave himself up to despair, but again the thought of the prize for which he had so long contended drove that feeling away, and made him the desperate man he was at certain times.

“ This must come to an end,” he grated from between clenched teeth, “ and by heaven ! if I don't end it soon,

there'll be no Rafe Ringbolt. The girl is just furious to kill me, and before she shall do that I'll kill her."

With this fearful determination, the renegade suddenly sprung aside, and jerked his pistol from his girdle. The unexpected movement disconcerted the girl, for she had deemed her antagonist near death in the midst of his great agony, for his clothes were blazing in several places, and his face and arms were a mass of blood and blisters. When the renegade drew his pistol she paused a moment, and then, scarcely believing that he would use the weapon otherwise than to awe her, she darted forward again, flinging the torch into his face.

But Snowflake had judged her demon wrongly, for before the flames could sweep that horrible face, a loud report pierced the smoke and hot air that filled the cave, and the avenging torch fell to the ground.

A second later the brave girl reeled, shrieked, and then dropped upon the stones!

"I had to do it," muttered Rafe Ringbolt, in extenuation of his crime. "If I hadn't killed her, she'd 'a' killed me. But is she dead?"

With the white smoke yet sweeping from the muzzle of the pistol, the coward stalked forward and bent over the beautiful creature he had stricken, undoubtedly in preservation of his own life.

It was evident that something had turned the ball aside, and upon examination, that something proved to be the torch. A deep furrow along Snowflake's left temple designated the track of the singing lead, and the blood streamed over the face, as white as the face of the dead. No twitching of the muscles greeted the renegade, and a cry of horror parted his lips when he discovered that no pulse throbbed in the delicate wrist.

"Dead, as sure as heaven!" he exclaimed, his hand shooting from the pulse to the heart. "Gods! I didn't want to kill her, but she brought it all on herself."

Then, all breathless and terribly excited, he placed his hand over the organ of life, and thought that he detected a faint throb. But it might have been the creature of his feverish imagination.

"She is alive, and that's about all. But I must git out of this hole, and I'm going to take her with me. Satan, keep Weatherford away till I vamose his cave."

While he uttered the last sentence he glanced toward the mouth of the cave, and beheld the eyes of Little Tomahawk regarding him.

"What! has the red devil freed himself?" cried the renegade, transfixed to the spot with horror; but a minute's inspection told him that the chief was not free.

"Tomahawk," he said, "the crazy queen is dead."

The Indian's eyes flashed joyously at these words, and then they wandered to the motionless form that lay upon the bloody floor.

"I didn't want to kill her, but I couldn't help it," continued Ringbolt. "Now, can't we compromise our little matter? You came here to kill the girl, and I have done the work for you. Now let us be friends. We must be brothers now. Without my help you must lie where you are till the Red Thunderbolt comes. What does Tomahawk say? Shall we be brothers?"

"The Indians and the Pale Outlaw will be brothers," said the chief. "What will he do? Let his actions be like those of the panther, swift and terribly certain. The Red Thunderbolt may bend over Nowedah now."

"I must get out of this hole," said Ringbolt, "and you must aid me."

This, Little Tomahawk and his confederates quickly promised to do, and the renegade tossed his knife to the chiefs. In a moment they were free and had transformed their strong bonds into a rope, which they lowered into the nether cave.

The savages had fashioned a loop at the end of the sinewy rope, and into this the renegade placed his feet. Then he found himself drawn swiftly toward the cavern's mouth, and at length he could see the Indians at the cord. While ascending, the renegade drew his pistol, which he had loaded after shooting Snowflake, but kept it at his side, and from the red-skins' sight. A malicious smile toyed with his parched lips, and during the ascent he muttered something that seemed to please him.

"Here I am!" he cried, as his head shot above the wall of the cavern, and his eyes fell upon the three chiefs.

"Come!" said Little Tomahawk, relinquishing the cord. "The Red Thunderbolt may appear. See!" and he pointed downward toward the nether cavern.

The quick-witted renegade comprehended the word and sign, and as he pretended to obey he saw White Crow spring forward with his own knife.

But the savage never reached his intended victim, for the double-barreled pistol spoke, and he sunk to the rock with a bullet in his heart.

"And ye, too!" he cried, turning the weapon upon Little Tomahawk.

The Creek saw the movement, and his head shot awry as the pistol cracked.

It was a lucky movement for the chief, for he avoided the ball, and a death-groan in his rear told him that the lead had entered Black Heron's brain!

Then he rose to his feet, but, before he could use his limbs, the renegade sprung upon him and dashed him senseless to the earth!

"That's what I call hullsale wiping out," he said, surveying his work. "Oh, the devils have not deserted Rafe Ringbolt yet. Now for the woods."

It was but the work of ten minutes for the renegade to form numerous steps in the rope, descend into the nether cavern and reascend with the lifeless body of the girl. Then, before he left the spot above, he tossed the bodies of the savages into the cave.

He reached the main cave near the water, and found Nowedah still lying where she had fallen after the death-blow.

"Satan, keep Weatherford away till I kin git a good start, and then he may catch me if he kin."

Without accident he reached the bank of the Coosa, and drew his boat from a tree-top. After scrutinizing his surroundings, he placed the beautiful burden in it, sprung in himself and sent the light craft across the stream with the speed of an arrow.

When he debarked he sunk the canoe, and then, with

Snowflake in his arms, plunged into the forest that separated him from the Catawba.

"I can't go far," was the reluctant confession, that came from the renegade's lips. "My body is as full of fire as the infernal regions, and I must go herb-hunting soon. There's a snug little place down here, on Big Snake creek, and if I kin reach that I'm safe. What! yes, the gal did open her eyes, but she don't know where she is nor who she is with. Well—"

The crack of a rifle, discharged a great distance behind the renegade, penetrated his ear, and he spun around like a crazy top.

"Hit! by heaven!" he cried, recovering his equilibrium and starting forward again. "But I'll make Big Snake creek yet. That bullet was intended for my heart, but it found my thigh. Thank fortune for that! Whoever fired don't care a cuss for the gal's life, and not a whit for mine. Courage! Rafe Ringbolt. Big Snake, and ye're safe."

CHAPTER XIV.

SECRETS AND DOOM.

WHEN Len Marion uttered the little adverb that closed our eleventh chapter, he illustrated the old saw that "A brave man never despairs." He had determined that Ringbolt's cave should not prove their grave, and the words that came forth again nerved Merciless Matt to battle against what the old man called inexorable fate. They left the obstructed corridor and kindled a fire in the cave. Fortunately they found enough wood to composed a torch, and by its glare they returned to the stone. The fire showed them that the boulder had been pushed into the passage from a niche, whose floor was slightly higher than that of the corridor, and that it took but little strength to throw the rock from its resting-place. In all probability Nature had thus disposed of the stone, though it never designed that man should use it as Rafe Ringbolt had chosen to do.

"If we were in the niche," said Marion, after an examination of their situation, "we could easily escape, and into the niche we are going."

"And how are we going to git there, boy?" asked Dean, with a puzzled expression.

"With our hatchets!" was the reply.

Merciless Matt laughed incredulously at the youth's words; but when he saw his hatchet send a scale from the stone he changed his air.

"I believe we can do it, boy!" he cried, springing to Marion's assistance, and a moment later the twain were raining blows upon the side of the niche.

For two hours they never paused. They were working for freedom; their own lives, and the rescue of one dearer to them than life itself. At the end of that period Len Marion squeezed his lithe body into the niche, and half an hour later Matt Dean, whose body was larger, joined him.

"Now for the Manitou's Cave," cried Matt. "Thither the coward and traitor has hastened, and we must give him a bit of lead before the sun goes to sleep."

"Yes, curse him," grated the youth. "I have a score to settle with him. 'Twas he who—"

"Don't mention it, boy," interrupted Dean, "I don't want to think of that now. If we find her alive she will settle the matter; if not you remain guilty in my eyes."

They were in the corridor when this conversation took place, and a moment later the youth's foot came in contact with something that precipitated him to the ground. The object moved as well as himself, and before he could rise he heard Matt Dean cry: "A boat, by heaven!"

A brief investigation told the twain that the hunter's foot had hurled a canoe from its hiding-place, and with congratulations of joy the bark was hurried forward and launched.

As they breasted the waves they took courage, and looked into each other's faces smilingly.

"Hark! the falls!" cried Matt Dean, at length. "A few more pulls and we are there. But, boy, I am afraid that we will get there too late. While we worked on that stone, Rafe Ringbolt, the infernal devil, was scooting up this stream, and he got there long ago."

The sharp crack of a rifle obliquely to their left put a stop to further conversation, and, dropping an oar, the White Slayer picked up his weapon.

"What did that mean?" he cried, and while the words still lingered on his lips, an Indian was seen to plunge into the water between them and the falls.

"It's that red devil, Weatherford!" cried Matt. "We will follow him. Something's going to come of this, boy, I tell you."

Len Marion had already turned the canoe toward the right bank, and he felt that the avenger's words were prophecy.

They were soon in the woods, and immediately caught sight of Weatherford flying through its recesses.

"What's up now?" cried the avenger. "What does he see, anyhow?"

"What?" exclaimed the youth, drawing Matt to the spot where he stood. "See! Rafe Ringbolt and the crazy queen!"

Yes, the Creek had brought the wounded renegade to bay, and now they glared at each other like angry tigers. Neither possessed a rifle that could be used, for Ringbolt had left his in the cave, and the chief's powder was too damp for service.

"If he would but drop the gal," said Matt Dean, "I'd drop him," and the avenger's finger crept to the trigger. "It's a long shot, but I'd never miss such a black mark as Rafe Ringbolt. Look! by heaven he drops the girl to take his pistols!"

"Curse you!" our friends heard the renegade say. "I've got you now. Your rifle failed you awhile back, but my pistols never go back on me."

When about twenty feet separated them, the renegade stopped to look to the priming of his weapons. For a moment his eyes were removed from his red antagonist, and in that brief period of time Weatherford darted upon him with clubbed rifle.

But the renegade was equal to the emergency. As quick as thought his pistols flew upward, and with the sharp crack of one, the Red Thunderbolt staggered back with a shriek.

"Ha! ha!" laughed Ringbolt starting toward the stricken

chief ; but the loud report of a rifle arrested his progress, and, like his victim, he leaped into the air and fell back with a cry.

Matt Dean and his companion sprung forward.

They glanced at the stricken men, but did not pause until they reached the girl's side.

Matt Dean raised her head, and one look drew a cry from his lips.

"Thank God ! thank God ! My child—my Myra !"

With a shout of joy, Len Marion bent nearer.

"No ! no !" cried Merciless Matt, pushing his hands away. "You know the crime imputed to you. You must not touch her until proven innocent. Go see if those men are dead."

With reluctance Len Marion turned from the beautiful creature, who was torn from him on their bridal day, and walked toward the renegade, who, he found, had already breathed his last.

Marion turned to Weatherford, who was on his feet when he reached him. The renegade's brief aim was unproductive of fatal results, and from his stunned condition the chief had almost fully recovered.

"White Slayer has found the withered rose," he said, looking at Merciless Matt, who was talking to his long-lost daughter. "Weatherford will go to him, for he wants to tell him something."

The twain now bent their steps toward father and daughter, and Dean darted a kindly look upon the chief, as he sprung to his feet.

"Weatherford, my child has almost made me love you," he said. "I know that you tried to save her life and the lives of others at Fort Mimms ; but you could not do it. But my oath ! My oath never to spare a Creek !" he cried, suddenly withdrawing his hand. "Oh, God, absolve me from it ; if not, visit upon me the punishment, for I can not kill this man."

The chief smiled.

"If the White Slayer can strike his *brother*, let the blow fall."

"My brother !" cried the old man, starting forward. "What do you mean ?"

"Let the White Slayer bare his right arm."

The arm was quickly uncovered, and a drawn bow in tattoo was found pricked therein.

"Oh, I knew that was there," said Dean; "but what does that prove?"

In answer to this interrogative, the Indian stretched forth his strong right arm, not red, but like that of a mulatto, and lo! a drawn bow was traced upon it.

"I see now!" cried the White Slayer, starting back. "My brother!"

"Yes, the Red Thunderbolt and the White Slayer own the same father. Long years ago, a white man came to the Seminoles, and took to wife the Red Thrush of that nation. To him in time she gave a child, and then the fever burned his brain to ashes. Bad Indians drove the Red Thrush from her people, and she found open lodges among the Creeks. Her pappoose grew tall like the forest trees, and became the Red Thunderbolt of that mighty nation. When he was a young warrior, the Seminole mother died; but ere she plucked the flowers for the last time, she told her son how his father had loved and wedded a pale-faced girl in the far northern land; how she died when she gave him a boy, how he marked the pappoose's arm, and then, leaving him with his people, fled from the land."

"Weatherford, we are truly brothers," said Merciless Matt. "My father never returned, and your story of his future life and death is confirmed by the bow on your arm."

"This is why Red Thunderbolt snatched White Slayer from the fire. Many a time my rifle could have killed him, but I said: 'No, he is my brother.' I would not tell White Slayer where his child was, because her poor head was cracked. When she ceased to talk about building flowery wigwams then I might have told him. Now, brother, we part. Go to your pale people, I to my red ones. Do not talk to me of peace. I will fight the pale-faces till my arm falls useless at my side; but it shall never strike my brother."

He would have turned away but Matt Dean caught his arm.

"But what of him?" he cried, pointing to Len Marion, who had stolen to Myra's side. "They say he fled from her like

a cowardly dog at the bloody fort. She says he fought like a lion to the bitter end. Do you confirm her words?"

"Yes," cried the Red Thunderbolt. "He never deserted your people, and he did not fall until all had fallen. Weatherford's hatchet struck him, but it did not strike to kill. Young hunter, forgive that blow. May you never see a shadow—you and your Snowflake, and when the dark river has been crossed, Weatherford will greet you again, in the lodges of his people's Manitou."

He drew Myra to his heart, kissed her, shook the men's hands, threw a glance of triumph upon Rafe Ringbolt's body, and then abruptly turned away, as much to conceal his tears as to leave the spot. They never saw him afterward.

"Boy, you're innocent!" cried Merciless Matt, grasping Marion's hand, "and in our future lives I'll try to earn your forgiveness. Myra is yours, and, oh! may your second wedding day be as bright as the other was dark. Weatherford's secrets are solved at last, and we will try to forget the past so dark—living only for the future."

A minute later the spot was deserted, and the reunited trio were hurrying toward Jackson's forces, which they reached in safety.

The Red Robin did not die of her wounds, for among the Indians who snatched her from the young hunter, as described in the foregoing pages, was a chief skilled in medicinal lore, and under his care she miraculously recovered, to share her father's love, and to wed a Cherokee sachem.

When the Creek war ended—when Merciless Matt had most terribly avenged his butchered family—there was an uninterrupted wedding in Tennessee, for no red-skins were near to drive the hardy settlers from the altar to the horrors of a massacre.

Of the fate of the Red Thunderbolt we know nothing, for his struggles against the whites, search the pages of history; but we do know that in a little home on the Cumberland, his half-brother lived to old age, surrounded by old age's sweetest blessings—a bevy of prattling grandchildren

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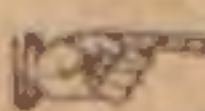
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